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ABSTRACT

This issue focuses on learning disabilities of adult literacy students. The 11 papers in the journal were developed from research done by the authors at an intensive summer institute in 1994. After an introduction and a description of the summer institute (Martha Merson), the following papers are included: "Lucie: Is She or Isn't She?" (Meryl Robin Becker); "Learning Styles and Their Validity in the ESL Classroom" (Jessica Spohn); "Reaching ESL Students: The Multiple Intelligences Instrument" (Katherine Dullea Hogan); "Using the Multisensory Game 'WORDS'" (Janice Forcellese); "Starting to Read: A Dyslexic Experience" (Ilda Montoya); "The Penalties of Illiteracy for the Non-Reading Detainee" (Betsey Webber); "Developing Educational Self-Esteem" (Lea Campolo); "Learning Abilities" (Lareese Hall); "An Ideal Student's Lack of Progress, or Snowshoveling in Unfamiliar Territory" (Martha Merson); "Finding the Key: The Educational Autobiography and Theory of Multiple Intelligences" (Cara Streck); and "Words to the Curious" (Lindy Whiton). (KC)

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CONNECTIONS

A Journal of Adult Literacy

The Learning Disabilities/ Lack of Progress Issue

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Connections: A Journal of Adult Literacy

Connections is a publication of the Adult Literacy Resource Institute, a joint project of Roxbury Community College and the University of Massachusetts/Boston, funded primarily by the Massachusetts Higher Education Coordinating Council, the Massachusetts Department of Education/Adult and Community Learning Services, and the City of Boston's EDIC/Department of Jobs and Community Services. The A.L.R.I. was created in 1983 as part of the Boston Adult Literacy Initiative and also serves as the Greater Boston Regional Support Center for the state's SABES network. The purpose of the A.L.R.I. is to provide training, technical assistance and other resources to Boston-area adult basic education programs. Our address is 989 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215. Our phone number is 617-782-8956; our fax number is 617-782-9011.

Connections is intended to provide an opportunity for adult educators, particularly those in the Boston area, to communicate with colleagues, both locally and nationwide. Adult literacy/adult basic education practitioners need a forum to express their ideas and concerns and to describe their students, their programs, and their own accomplishments; we are glad to be able to continue providing this opportunity.

We welcome your reactions to this journal or to any of the articles in it. We also want to strongly encourage teachers, counselors, administrators, aides, volunteers, students—everyone involved in this field—to think about sharing your experiences, your ideas, your problems and solutions with others by writing for the next issue of *Connections*. Please contact us; we'd be glad to talk with you about your ideas for an article.

The articles included here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Adult Literacy Resource Institute or its sponsoring institutions or funders. Permission must be obtained from the A.L.R.I. before reprinting an article in another publication or for widespread distribution.

For this issue of *Connections:*

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Introduction: A Standard Balance Beam

Martha Merson

Welcome to this issue of *Connections* by the Boston Inquiry Collaborative on Learning Disabilities and Lack of Progress. This long name describes nine teachers and two facilitators who gathered periodically during the summer of 1994 for an intensive institute. All of the papers printed in this volume stem from the collective research we began in June, 1994. As you read, you will find this collection is neither the definitive handbook on approaches for teaching nor is it quantitative research into adult learning disabilities. Note that a standard balance beam is four inches wide. Not much room for balance, but more than is offered by the common image of educators walking a tightrope.

This issue of *Connections* strives for a balance. It includes both voices that reject the idea of labeling a learner and voices that accept the idea. It is both teachers' theories about learning ability and disability, as well as concrete descriptions of activities. The settings described include community-based programs serving ESL adults and native speakers of English, young adults, GED, homeless, as well as a county jail serving detainees. The teachers worked with diagnosed and undiagnosed learners one-to-one and in groups. Furthermore, each paper strives for a balanced portrayal of the learners, their strengths and coping strategies or contexts as well as their weaknesses and problems.

Gymnasts believe that anything possible on the floor can be executed on the beam. They find their flexibility in the four inches of width rather than finding rigidity in the edges. Teacher inquiry or teacher research posits that the answers to questions about a learner's lack of progress or difficulty reading or writing lie in the classroom. Teachers observe themselves and their learners, seeing the familiar as an anthropologist or foreign visitor might, collect data, and analyze the work, notes, transcripts or tapes for patterns and insights to patterns usually and easily overlooked in the life of the classroom.

For some teachers, the idea of finding the answers in their own classroom is upsetting. As teacher Diane McMullen once said, "I just came from there. If I thought the answers were there, I wouldn't have come to this workshop." Yet, for the teachers in this volume, even with a set of narrow circumstances, constraints, too many questions, and not enough time, incredible movement is possible.

Though Diane and others might have been happy to go through the workshop routine, as facilitators, we chose to ask teachers to develop their own routines. We started with teachers' questions. Without a working definition or even a disagreement about the working definition of learning disabilities/lack of progress, we recorded and refined the research questions about LD adults, and many of us read *7 Kinds of Smart*, by Thomas Armstrong, to inform ourselves about multiple intelligences theory.

The articles in this volume focus on three strands: coping with learning disabilities, multiple intelligences (or learning style), and learners' autobiographies. In addition, each teacher documents her own position in the learning disabilities debate. Meryl Becker's article, "Lucie: Is She or Isn't She?," frames the debate with a review of the literature. Ilda Montoya and Betsey Webber each work with very beginning readers. Their papers look at coping strategies. The authors of the three papers in the ESL section incorporate multisensory assessment and instruction in their classes. Jessica Spohn's search for valid tools in a multi-cultural classroom is an interesting lead-in to Kathleen Hogan's observations of the usefulness of the survey in *7 Kinds*

of Smart. Janice Forcellese's article raises questions about a multisensory approach that can be used in a social and highly participatory ESL class. In the final section, Lareese Hall and Martha Merson look at their learners' abilities through writing, while Lea Campolo and Cara Streck use a combination of uncovering learners' histories and untapped intelligence.

The final article in the collection, "Words to the Curious," is Lindy Whiton's account of the summer institute. She writes about the rationale and the process the group took, for those interested in doing such a project or for those who are merely curious. Her reflections on what we learned in the project and about the process provide additional context for readers who value the stage directions as much as the script.

Our hope is that all adult education teachers find success in their balancing acts and the flexibility within them to change direction and approach as often as situations warrant. We welcome reactions and critiques which can be addressed to Martha Merson or Steve Reuys at the Adult Literacy Resource Institute, 989 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02215. Ω

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Lucie: Is She or Isn't She?

Meryl Robin Becker

...This is the age of perfection, kid. Everybody try their emotional and mental and physical damnedest. Strive, strive. Correct all defects.
— Judith Guest

Lucie is from Haiti. She has been in the U.S. for more than ten years and her spoken English is fairly good, although heavily accented. She wants to get her GED. However, she seems to be no closer to her goal than she was the last time she was in our program. Several years ago she was a student in our ABE program and then attended a training program in basic clerical skills. Even though she was assisted by the job developers and conducted an intense job search, she couldn't find an office job and now works as a night attendant at a residence for handicapped adults. Her dream is to get her GED and then find training and a job in the medical field. She's a friendly and outgoing person, and I remembered her well from the last time she was in our program, but I was dismayed when she tested at a fourth grade reading level. She seemed to have forgotten much of what she'd learned.

The literacy class that she entered was composed of eight students; two were native speakers of English and the rest were from Haiti and Latin America. Her English and her awareness of American culture and current events were better than those of the non-native speakers in the class, and her decoding skills were good, but she often needed extra attention to help her follow directions, and she seemed to become confused by how things were arranged on paper.

For example, when doing an exercise where she had to find a city on a map on graph-like paper by counting the boxes, 2 up 3 down, and so on, she had difficulty following the directions. After being taken through the procedure step by step with a tutor helping her find ten different points, she had no more idea what she was doing when she finished than when she began. When doing a matching exercise where she had to find the answer that is equal in value to the fraction on the left, such as 1/2 = 2/3 6/9 2/4 8/12, although she knew how to reduce fractions and could sometimes pick the correct answer, other times she would get confused and say the answer was the fraction she began with—in this example, 1/2.

When she was given a page of definitions with more than one meaning from *Samantha*, a book I wrote, she had trouble with the three definitions:

> 5. concentrate:
> (1) (noun) - something with the water taken out to make it stronger, thicker.
> You add water to orange juice concentrate.
> (2) (verb) - to keep your thoughts on one thing.
> She tried to concentrate on the teacher's words.
> (3) (verb) - to bring together in one place.
> All the stores are concentrated in the downtown area.

She could not see that 1, 2 and 3 were subsets of "concentrate," and had trouble distinguishing three separate definitions and the difference between the definition and the sentence using the word.

I also noticed that when she told a story orally, the class and I would often have trouble following her as she went on and on, not seeming to be able to distinguish between the purpose of the story and a confusing array of details, some of which had nothing to do with the point of the story.

Given these difficulties and the way her skills had regressed since she'd been in our program previously, I wondered if she might not have a learning disability in visual perception and/or thinking skills.

I'd often seen students on all different levels who had difficulty with thinking skills and following information on a page. These students had trouble with making inferences, following directions and sequence

and so on. Some of them also had poor reading skills, yet others could read quite well. I'd noticed this in both native and non-native speakers of English. These were most often the students who, like Lucie, seemed to hit a wall; their lack of progress was frustrating both for them and for their teachers.

These observations led me to a series of questions. Do these students have what is commonly called a learning disability, that is, a biological disability that is inherited or caused by birthing or health problems? Or are these problems a result of other influences on them, such as poor schooling and emotional and cultural issues? Would it be necessary to have these students tested for a learning disability in thinking skills to make the distinction, or would I as a classroom teacher be able to make that kind of judgment by the signs I see in the classroom? So many students have difficulty with these kinds of skills; several other students in my class had similar but less severe problems with thinking skills; most had limited schooling and lives full of problems. How could I make the distinction? I couldn't send them all to be tested. Most importantly, does the cause of the problem affect what you do about it? Would I teach the two types of students differently?

Looking at Lucie's Background

To try and answer these questions I began by asking Lucie about her educational, health and family background to see if that would give me a clue to the roots of her difficulties. She told me that she was born at home and that it was a normal delivery. She had no health problems as a child or as an adult, no alcohol or drug problems, and had not been exposed to lead or any other toxic substances as far as she knew.

As a small child she lived with her mother, and did not begin school until she was eight or nine years old because the public school was too far away, and there was no money to put her in private school until then. After that she lived at different times throughout her childhood with her mother, father, grandmother and godfather, changing schools each time she moved back and forth. She said she liked school, but that it was hard to keep up when she was constantly moving from school to school.

She indicated that her father was "really educated." He had finished high school and read a lot of books that were too hard for her, even books in Latin. However, it was at age twelve when she was living with her father and had finished fifth grade that her father was low on money and stopped sending her to school. She deeply resents that her father sent many of his other children to school but did not send her. "I could have had a good job." Most of her brothers and sisters finished high school; one is currently attending engineering school. Her mother had very little education.

"I tried hard to get education by myself," she says, and started to do so by attending night school in Haiti before she left. Once in the U.S. she attended two different English as a Second Language programs before coming to our school. Before leaving Haiti, her mother arranged a marriage for her and she came to the U.S. with her husband and two children. Her problems with her husband became very bad, and she gets very emotional talking about it. She lived in a women's shelter for a while and now has an apartment for herself and her children. When I asked her what she feels she does well, she said she does her job well and gets along with residents and staff there. She is a good cook and is helping to organize a catering service through a women's group she belongs to. She is active in her church, attends meetings at her children's school, and goes to demonstrations in support of Haiti. She feels she is patient with her kids. The only problem she expressed having at work was that she took a CPR training class and failed the proficiency test three times.

Looking back over Lucie's answers, there are clearly many external, environmental and emotional influences on Lucie's education: her father's lack of interest in her education and her anger about it, starting school late, moving from school to school, stopping school after fifth grade, the traumatic ending to her marriage and the pain of living in a shelter. These seem to point to external and emotional causes of her lack of progress.

On the other hand, there are other students in my class that have even less education than Lucie, yet they progress slowly but steadily. They don't have the inconsistencies in their work that Lucie has. We can't tell what her mother's educational ability might have been, but certainly her father and brothers and sisters were capable of learning well. She clearly has the motivation to get more education, yet after five tries at additional schooling, her skills are still low. There is a discrepancy between her academic ability and her ability to function well in her personal, social and political life. At work her only failure was again academic, yet her employer kept her on due to the value of her other skills. All these factors seemed to point to a possible neurological or perceptual learning disability.

Are Lucie's learning problems due to external or internal problems, or are they a combination of both? It began to seem to me impossible to sort out, because each person is such a complicated mix of internal and external factors, especially when dealing with thinking and perceptual skills, which cannot be easily explained or defined, either.

I thought of another student I'd had who had trouble reading as a child, felt like a misfit in his

educated family, acted up in school to draw attention away from his academic deficiencies, became an alcoholic, had several severe car accidents and a jail term because of drunk driving and then wound up in my class. How could I separate out the factors in his life that made him who is in my class at age 40? What, then, is a learning disability? Could I really make what seemed to me a radical statement, that all of these factors are involved in learning problems, and that trying to identify people's thinking skills problems out of the context of their lives was not only pointless, but impossible? I went to the library to see what the experts had to say on this dilemma.

Looking at the Literature

The first authors I read tried to make a clear distinction between external and internal influences. Joan M. Harwell, in her *Complete Learning Disabilities Handbook*, defines a learning disability as "educational difficulties that do not stem from inadequate educational experiences or cultural factors," (page 3) and the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities says that learning disabilities "are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunctions... [and]...are *not* the direct result of any external conditions or influences." However, Harwell seems to contradict herself when she mentions poor hearing as one of the causes, and emotional problems as one of the symptoms of learning disabilities. Poor hearing is something that can often be corrected, and does not have to do with the neurological capabilities of the mind. If learning disabilities cause emotional problems, don't we have to look at how these emotional problems may further limit the student's ability to learn?

Harwell lists the kinds of conceptual deficits a person might have—"cannot see relationships between similar concepts, classification activities are difficult, cannot do inferential thinking, cannot think in an orderly, logical way," and so on, but also states, "In my experience, the most frequent causes of conceptual deficits are (1) a lack of language development and (2) a lack of experience." (p. 3, 103)

Harwell also says that many people have slight learning disabilities and just compensate for them. It seems reasonable to assume, then, that a person might have a slight intrinsic disabililty that he or she might fairly easily compensate for, given good health, a caring family, stimulation as a child and good education. A slight disability coupled with poor health, family and emotional problems and little education might become a large barrier. Why not then accept the idea that poor health, family and emotional problems and poor education *alone* might give a person similar learning difficulties?

The profound effect of external influences on an internal problem is supported by David Bellinger, *et al*, in their article "Low Level Lead Exposure and Children's Cognitive Function in the Pre-school Years." They found that when children's cognitive skills were affected by exposure to lead, children from middle and upper socio-economic brackets recovered better in their cognitive abilities than did children in lower socio-economic groups. As I continued to read, I began to find other authors that did take both external and internal factors into account. Lawrence J. Greene, in his book *Kids Who Hate School*, says (page 27):

> Factors which can cause or contribute to a learning disability include:
>
> 1. Low aptitude or intelligence
> 2. Emotional problems
> 3. Poor teaching
> 4. Neurological disorders (brain damage)
> 5. Sensory impairment (for example, a hearing or vision loss)
> 6. Perceptual dysfunction (for example, poor visual memory)
> 7. Language deficiencies (for example, English is not the native language)
> 8. Language disorders (for example, speech impediments or difficulty with oral expression)
> 9. Cultural or environmental influences (for example, academic achievement is not reinforced by the family or subculture).

In the same book Greene points out the difficulty in trying to separate out the internal and external influences:

> Subcultures which de-emphasize education or which place little value on academic achievement tend to produce children with academic problems. This de-emphasis on the value of education makes distinguishing between academic problems which are the result of specific learning disabilities and those which are the result of cultural or language influences very difficult....The line delineating an emotionally based learning problem from a non-emotionally based learning problem is not always clear. (pages 66, 96)

In *Learning Disabilities and Your Child*, Greene also addresses the difficulty in identifying problems with thinking skills: "The child with nonspecific learning deficiencies frequently confounds...Although everyone may recognize that the child is not learning

efficiently, no one is quite sure why he's stuck..." And in *Getting Smarter: Simple Strategies for Better Grades* he states that, "Learning problems such as dyslexia are more likely to be recognized and treated than more nebulous learning problems characterized by disorganization, impulsiveness and poor study skills." Lovinger, Brandell and Seestedt in *Language Learning Disabilities* comment that the fact that a student has been labeled learning disabled in school may in itself cause him or her to be underexposed to exercises that develop thinking skills. "A language learning disordered student is not challenged to extend her/his thinking processes. Many of the activities presented to these children involve only recalling facts." (page 102)

I was excited to find that I was not alone in noticing the contradictions and confusions in trying to define learning disabilities when so many factors merge together and interact. Sally L. Smith, in *Succeeding Against the Odds*, says that specialists in the field have no common agreement about who is learning disabled, the best way to diagnose it and how to treat it. Because specialists disagree as to who is learning disabled, there is no reliable way of knowing how many people are affected. She goes on to emphasize:

> Whatever their disagreements about the scope of the term learning disabilities, specialists do agree on one thing: learning disabilities are not a single condition but a group of related and often overlapping conditions that lead to low achievement by people who have the potential to do much better. (page 5)

Finally, I came across authors who not only agreed with my "radical" notion, but went far beyond it. *In Making the Words Stand Still*, Donald Lyman also comments on the lack of agreement in defining learning disabilities. Besides the term "learning disability" there are "many other labels—some emphasizing particular aspects of the handicap, others trying to define the handicap by its cause (a difficult task, since its etiology is probably multiple and still unknown)" (page 48). He says that at last count he had identified fifty-five labels. Lyman himself has a learning problem and in the beginning of his book he gives his own definition of a learning disability:

> a disability occurring among people of normal intelligence, causing moderate to severe deficits in one, some, or all of the following: reading, spelling, writing, arithmetic, spoken language, attention, concentration, memory, self control and/or organization. (page 48)

This is more inclusive than most of the definitions I'd seen, but as the book goes on Lyman makes the case that people with the label "learning disabled" learn in a different, but not necessarily inferior way. They do not fit into the educational and cultural philosophies of the schools and society, but they are not wrong, just different. We should look at their strengths rather than their weaknesses. Their learning style is more concrete, sensory and kinesthetic; they are not good at symbols, but have a superior ability to be creative and experience life directly. He changes his definition to:

> Learning disability is a normal psychophysiological condition that inclines the mind-brain-body to favor the experiences and imagings of concrete reality over symbolic/semantic representations of that reality. (page 165)

Diane McGuinness, in *When Children Don't Learn*, has the most inclusive definition of all: "The true definition of learning disabilities is: The failure to learn anything at a normal rate, for whatever the reason." (page 6) However, she goes on, why is the range of what is a normal rate so narrow, and why don't we call someone who is unable to learn baseball learning disabled? We don't call people's inability to learn sports or music or how to fix a car a learning disability because "students are called learning disabled only in those skills that society designates as important to the culture: reading, writing and mathematics." (page 7) Abilities such as athletic or mechanical aptitude are considered to be inherited talents, while literacy is considered to be a routine skill that anyone can learn. If we lived in a society where hunting was valued above all else, perhaps a person who hunted poorly would be called learning disabled, even if he could read well, if reading had no usefulness or value in that society. She also points out that not only do we ignore learning differences in individuals, but the learning differences in boys and girls are also ignored, which is why 75% of dyslexics and 90% of hyperactive children are male, and why so many females are said to have "math phobia."

Conclusion

When I finished my research, I felt much more confident about my original hypothesis, that the many intermeshing factors that influence the way a person learns and thinks cannot be separated. Even two people with similar influences will react to them differently. Each person must be taken individually, without labels, in the context of the whole of their lives and experiences. Lucie is Lucie, a unique individual unlike any other. I also realized that I had changed the way I look at learning and people's ability to learn. Seeing how much culture defines the importance of some

skills over others gives me new respect for the non-academic strengths so central to who people are. Lucie is a warm communicator, an excellent cook, a person who feels deeply the problems of her country and acts on these beliefs. Thus, rather than trying to categorize or label Lucie, I can concentrate on the next question, the subject of another paper: How can I reach into the complexity of the person that is Lucie and find the key to what will help her learn? Ω

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Learning Styles and Their Validity in the ESL Classroom

Jessica Spohn

A man's style is his mind's voice.
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Introduction to Articles by Spohn and Hogan

Everyone has different strengths and weaknesses. As a teacher it is important to understand how your students learn. It's also important to incorporate their learning styles into your teaching style. Although this is a valid goal, it is not an easy goal to accomplish, especially in the ESL classroom. Cultural differences and language can create a barrier in a teacher's ability to understand how her students learn. Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) can yield valuable information about what a student wants and needs to learn. But IEPs do not help us understand how a student learns most efficiently. A sensitive teacher will develop this awareness over time. It would be wonderful if an instrument existed that could help accelerate that awareness.

Through the A.L.R.I. Summer Institute on Learning Disabilities, the two of us teamed up and decided to tackle this question together. We both began by reading *7 Kinds of Smart* by Thomas Armstrong. This book discusses the theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI). It ties that theory into a discussion of learning styles.

Through other reading, we learned that we take in information through our senses, called acuity. Perception refers to how well the senses handle this information. As an example, visual acuity refers to how good the physical sense of eyesight is, whereas visual perception refers to how efficiently this visual information is received. Nerve impulses then transmit this information to the brain where it is processed. Learning style instruments are generally designed to identify which senses are more efficient in an individual. Perception in the following senses is usually assessed: sight (visual perception), hearing (auditory perception), and touch (tactile perception which is usually coupled with kinesthesia). Smell and taste are generally not included (although they are very good modes for learning).

The senses and nerves transmit information to the brain, and there the information is interpreted (processed). The various parts of the brain have their own special tasks to do, each affecting different parts of the body. Intelligence might be defined as the way the whole person—brain and entire body—uses this sensory information.

Learning style and MI instruments are useful for discovering how people learn best. These tests show us people's strengths as well as weaknesses. By using this information we can teach more efficiently. Instead of spending a lot of time, for example, trying to explain something over and over to a student with an auditory weakness, it helps to supplement the explanation with a visual stimulus.

We liked the idea of looking at our ESL students' strengths, in terms of their styles of learning and their intelligences. We agreed to look for a test or inventory that would meet these two criteria: (1) the testing process itself would be a learning experience for the students, especially in English, and (2) the testing tools would yield reliable data when used with ESL students.

In our papers, we each discuss the test we chose. Spohn discusses the inventory she uses, comparing the results with her intuitive and experience-based assessment. Hogan describes her implementation of the checklist, the obstacles she encountered, and her application of what she learned teaching one point of grammar with multiple intelligences in mind. While we took different steps to prepare students for their learning style and multiple intelligences assessments, in both cases the activities generated opportunities for English communication as well as increased understanding of students' strengths.

— Jessica Spohn and Katherine D. Hogan

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The background reading we did for this project proved extremely helpful. The book *7 Kinds of Smart* provides the teacher with an extensive checklist one can administer to students. This checklist provides valuable insight into a learner's strengths and weaknesses. The book also offers teaching strategies and activities to help strengthen a learner's weak area.

Unfortunately, although the book provided me with a valid checklist, it was inappropriate for my students. I attempted to paraphrase the difficult vocabulary and concepts, but I felt I was creating a document that was invalid. I decided to continue looking at other instruments hoping to find one that fit my needs. My current class is low-intermediate. I administered the ABLE to the majority of my students and found the reading comprehension ranged from 2.9 to 6.0. With that information I felt any instrument I found would need vocabulary and conceptual clarification in the classroom before I could administer it and expect it to yield any valid results. The instrument I decided to use is from a book titled *Help Yourself: How to Take Advantage of Your Learning Styles,* by Gail Sonbuchner (New Readers Press, 1991). This book is a hands-on manual on how to help yourself learn. It is geared to the adult learner. The book focuses on how to utilize six different learning styles: writing, listening, speaking, visualizing, manipulating, and reading. The inventory helps assess how one learns most efficiently. This inventory serves as a non-threatening way in which to assess the learning difficulties my students might have. I suspected two of my students might have learning disabilities, Esther and Julio.

Before administering the checklist, I developed a pre-test consisting of what I perceived to be the more difficult vocabulary and concepts on the inventory. The results of this test showed most of the class had mastery of over 80% of the vocabulary. I taught the unfamiliar words and concepts and had tutors work with the students on areas of individual difficulty. I reviewed the inventory with the class before administering it. After I modeled the questions that were unclear, I felt most of my students understood the inventory.

Before analyzing the results of the inventory, I decided to write anecdotal assessments of how I felt my students learned. I've taught some of the students for two years, and some only a few weeks. I thought it would be interesting to compare my perceptions of their learning styles to the results of the inventory. I was still concerned about the issue of comprehension. If my perceptions were validated by the results of the inventory, I would feel more comfortable in using it as a tool in the classroom.

I will begin by discussing students I've taught for a substantial period of time. It is easier to judge the results of the inventories when I'm already familiar with the learners' strengths and weaknesses.

Anecdotal Information and Test Results of Long-Term Students

Esther—*My Assessment:* Esther is a Ghanaian woman in her early forties. She has lived in the U.S. for about five years. She works as a seamstress. Esther had to leave school around the second grade. She was the oldest daughter in her family and she had to help her mother with her brothers and sisters as well as a large extended family. Esther's English is at an intermediate level but she reads and writes at the second grade level. This creates a problem in the class when I rely on worksheets and other written material. Esther is a very sophisticated thinker. She enjoys political discussions, and she has an excellent sense of humor. She is very helpful in defining words in class. She has a good grasp of the multiple meaning of words. She is a great storyteller and uses English descriptively. Esther becomes withdrawn when we depend on written material for language development. She wants to read and she is working specifically on reading with her tutor.

Esther's Results: I read most of the questions directly to Esther because her reading level is low. Her results suggested she learns most efficiently through listening, speaking and manipulation. It is hard to judge if the inventory gives a full picture of Esther as a learner. She is basically a non-reader. She cannot rely on learning strategies that require reading. I think this highlights one of the problems in using inventories when comprehension is a basic issue. Esther will rely on the strategies she can use. She has many learning strengths that are not apparent through the results of her inventory. She clearly uses visualization and memorization in vocabulary and syntax acquisition. When Esther reads material suited to her reading level, she processes the information very efficiently. She is afraid to fail, so she will avoid reading because it feels uncomfortable to her. I do not feel Esther's reading problems stem from a learning disability; rather, I think they are the result of a lack of exposure. She can decode and she uses contextual strategies to understand new vocabulary. As her reading improves, I think other learning strategies will open up to her.

Her inventory provides a limited snapshot of Esther as a learner. The most important information I got from Esther's inventory was that she enjoys using manipulatives. Because I teach an intermediate class, I tend not to use manipulatives. That is something I'm going to change. Several other students mentioned manipulation as a learning strength. There are many places I can incorporate manipulatives into my teach-

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ing. Even though Esther's inventory was not a complete picture of her, it will help me to be a better teacher for her.

Julio—*My Assessment*: Julio is a 35-year-old man from the Dominican Republic. He has lived in Boston for about five years, but he has bounced back and forth between Boston and the Dominican Republic. He has a seventh or eighth grade education. His reading comprehension is good but his writing reveals many problems. Julio tries to dominate the class verbally. He tries to change topics when he's not directly involved or interested in the subject. He makes inappropriate comments, and he is often reprimanded by the other students. His attention span seems quite short. I have taught him for about eight months. I have seen a lot of growth in his vocabulary but little improvement in his writing, spelling, and written or spoken use of English grammar.

Julio's Results: They indicate that he learns best through reading, speaking, visualization, and manipulation. Julio is a difficult student. I feel his results are accurate because his two weakest areas are writing and listening—the only strategies he didn't list. I have been frustrated by Julio's lack of progress. It has been hard for him to focus on topics long enough to master them. I will make an attempt to use manipulatives, and I'll develop hands-on materials for Julio to work on. Julio is a carpenter. I will build on his ability to manipulate materials and channel that talent into his academic pursuits. The inventory doesn't prove that Julio has a learning disability. For me, the importance of his inventory was to remind me to see Julio more holistically. I've dwelled on how Julio has failed and ignored his learning strengths. Julio has a lot of energy and intelligence. Hopefully, by utilizing his strengths, he will have better cognitive outcomes and become a more positive force in the class.

Tuong—*My Assessment:* Tuong is a Vietnamese man in his late forties. He has a high school education and he was an officer in the South Vietnamese Army, where he received advanced training. Tuong was a prisoner of war for seven years during the Vietnamese War. Tuong is an amazing student. I have taught him for half a year. His grasp of vocabulary and English grammar is incredible. He often corrects my spelling and punctuation. Tuong has a very difficult time speaking. He has made tremendous progress, but he still has trouble talking in a spontaneous way. He loves to read and write. He is a very intellectual person, but he translates from English to Vietnamese to English every time he talks. I would like to see him think less and talk more.

Tuong's Results: They indicate that he learns most efficiently through reading, speaking, visualization, and manipulation. Tuong's results seem accurate. Tuong is an excellent artist; he can render very realistic images. He can develop very symbolic imagery. I will develop projects that capitalize on Tuong's ability to visualize and manipulate. Then I will have him describe his work to the class. I will use more cooperative learning activities to force Tuong to explain his process to the other students.

Anecdotal Information and Test Results of Short-Term Students

Van—*My Assessment:* Van is a Vietnamese woman in her mid-twenties. She has lived in the United States for three and a half years. Van has made tremendous progress in our program. She was a low basic student last year and now she is at a middle intermediate level. Van has an elementary school education but could not attend high school because her father was in the South Vietnamese Army and the family was very poor. She depends heavily on her sister and a computer dictionary to help her translate words she is unfamiliar with.

Van's Results: They show that she learns most efficiently through writing, reading and listening. Van's results are consistent with my impressions of her as a learner. Van takes a lot of responsibility for herself. She will reformat information I present to suit her learning styles. She writes constantly and sometimes cheats herself because her fluency suffers from her need to memorize. Again, one of the problems in using the inventory is that it highlights how a student feels most comfortable learning. Van has an extensive English vocabulary; she needs to speak more. She needs to feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes. She will never master the connotation of words if she is not engaged in speaking with other students. Although I've only known Van for a short time, my instincts tell me I must make sure she spends a lot of time speaking. She will master an academic level of competency in English through reading, writing and listening, but she will still be unable to communicate with people. I will use the information her inventory provided in the most creative way possible. Because Van enjoys reading, I will try to introduce her to novels and short stories that use idiomatic expressions and illustrate aspects of American culture she may not be familiar with. The importance of Van's inventory is that it will force me to be more creative with the information I already have.

Hein—*My Assessment:* Hein is a Vietnamese woman in her mid-twenties. She and Van are sisters. She too has made remarkable progress in a short period of time. Her English is somewhat better than her sister's, perhaps because she is in the workforce. She

also attempts to engage in conversation with the non-Vietnamese students during break time. She is a very animated and social person. She loves to write and her writing seems very sophisticated for a person with only an elementary school education. She uses many different strategies to acquire new language. She tries to use contextual analysis, analogies, antonyms, and synonyms, as well as her computer dictionary and the other Vietnamese students in the class. She has clear-cut goals and she knows how her acquisition of English fits in. She is a very fast learner and a teacher-proof student.

Hein's Results: They show she learns most efficiently through reading, speaking, visualization, listening, and writing. As I said before, Hein is a teacher-proof student. She seems to learn by osmosis. She soaks up knowledge. Her inventory just confirms what I've observed about her in a very short period of time.

Maria—*My Assessment:* Maria is a 35-year-old woman from El Salvador who has been in the U.S. for three years. In El Salvador she reached the second year of college. She wants to be a teacher. Her pronunciation of English is not very good. I have noticed that she seems to have trouble retaining concepts and vocabulary, but she seems to work best in small group settings. She does not like to be called on without volunteering an answer. She seems to freeze when she is the center of attention.

Maria's Results: They indicate that she learns best through listening and visualization. I am uncomfortable with Maria's results. I cannot judge the accuracy of this inventory because I am not sure if she understood the questions. I plan to retest Maria using a Spanish-speaking student as an interpreter. This reinforces for me the limits of using the inventory when comprehension is a problem. I have not developed a profile of Maria as a learner so I cannot compare her results with my impressions. I would not develop learning strategies based on the information this inventory yielded.

Melbey—*My Assessment:* Melbey is a 37-year-old woman from El Salvador. She finished the tenth grade and has been in the U.S. for seven years. She works for an insurance company. Her spoken English is high intermediate, and I'm going to move her into our pre-GED program as soon as she feels comfortable with the idea. She is an efficient learner. She self-checks and seems to listen to herself while she speaks. She has strong interpersonal skills and actively helps the other students in the class. She has very creative ideas and loves to contribute to and run class discussions. She will rely on English to explain words and concepts, even with other Spanish-speaking students.

Melbey's Results: They indicate she learns most efficiently through reading, speaking, and listening. Even though I've only taught Melbey for a few weeks, her inventory results seem accurate. She seems comfortable learning through straightforward traditional approaches. She prefers worksheets where she can check her work against an answer key to more open-ended, creative activities. Melbey talks a lot and asks a lot of questions. She discusses her learning process with me. Her results helped me confirm my decision to move her into a pre-GED class because her learning styles are a good match for that program.

Analysis

I was surprised by the information the inventory yielded. A majority of my students indicated that they learned most efficiently through manipulation as well as reading, writing, listening and speaking. To make sure the class really understood the section on manipulation, I had the students paraphrase the questions in class. It was clear to me they really did grasp the concepts and their enthusiasm in the discussion suggested that the class would benefit from more hands-on activities.

I was surprised by my findings, probably because this is really the first time I've focused on how each one of my students learns. As most good and caring teachers do, I develop and teach units that are meaningful to my students' lives. I think a lot about what to teach my students. I don't want to minimize the importance of this process, but prior to this experience, I would complain that different students weren't getting certain objectives, or that some students weren't retaining what they'd learned. I really had not asked myself why, or tried to analyze what would help my students learn more efficiently.

Through this process of administering the learning styles inventory, as well as writing and thinking about my students, I'm re-evaluating how I structure and teach my class. I'm looking at my students in a more holistic way. I am trying to start from their needs as learners. I'm changing my teaching style to accommodate them. I've always depended heavily on visual stimulation as a basis for language development. I'm experimenting with manipulatives like cuisinaire rods when I teach grammar. I'm making art in the classroom rather than just talking about art. We learned a song and acted it out. The class is interested in reading and producing a play. I am trying to make my class truly a student-centered environment.

The major problem I see in using the inventory is the issue of comprehension. The inventory helped me when it reaffirmed my sense of a student as a learner. In most cases the inventory deepened my insight into how my students learn. This works when I already have

a good profile of a student as a learner. Then I can contrast the inventory results with my impressions. With the students I don't know well, I am unsure of the validity of the results. I would not want to base the direction of my teaching on results I didn't trust. I wouldn't use the inventory with new students. I would prefer to administer the inventory after several months as I developed a deeper understanding of them. That way, the issue of comprehension could be put into context and I could judge the inventory's results against my impressions of the student.

I was an effective teacher before I began this investigation. This process has taught me a lot about how people learn. I think I will be a more effective teacher as I continue to incorporate the information the learning inventory provides me with. In a sense I have been forced to challenge myself and to become more creative as I shift my teaching style. I encourage all teachers to learn more about the theory of multiple intelligences and to use it as a tool in their teaching.Ω

Reaching ESL Students: The Multiple Intelligences Instrument

Katherine Dullea Hogan

Style...is formed very early in life, while the imagination is warm and impressions are permanent.
— Thomas Jefferson

Please see the "Introduction" at the start of the previous article by Jessica Spohn.

Over the twelve years that the subject of learning disabilities has interested me, I have grown to think of it more as "other learning abilities." What does "other" refer to? First of all, learning-disabled (LD) usually refers to the student who is weak in mathematical and/or verbal skills, the traditional core subject areas. If this student is said to have a "good ear" for music or excels at sports or is very gregarious, however, these traits usually are considered less important academically than verbal and math skills.

Our intelligence is not limited to linguistic, or verbal, and mathematical-logical intelligence. These are only two out of seven types, according to Thomas Armstrong's *7 Kinds of Smart*. The other (equally important) five are spatial-visual, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and musical. This is the theory of multiple intelligences (MI).

I wanted to assess my students' learning styles and/or MI for these reasons: 1) To help them understand themselves better. Even though I do teach to the seven intelligences, I wanted my students to learn more about themselves; this is why I taught and administered the MI checklist; and 2) To guide me in lesson planning that is geared to individual needs.

Context

I currently teach the students in the Office Systems Training Program at the Asian American Civic Association in Boston. Most are from China and Vietnam, range in age from 23 to 46 years, and have been here between one and 33 years. Their level of English ranges from intermediate to advanced. They mainly speak Cantonese, Mandarin and Vietnamese.

My classroom is a large room which is shared by other teachers/programs at various hours of the day. Two walls are lined with typewriter tables, as I also teach basic typing in the Prevocational program. The desks are arranged in a U-shape. There is a very small "library" in the room which is used once a week for independent reading.

The program is a six-month office skills training program in which the students learn how to do word processing and spreadsheets, filing, and machine transcription, to use the telephone, to improve their grammar and communication skills, and to better understand and experience American culture. It is a full-time program, including a four-week clerical internship at the end.

When I began this study, I had a particular student in mind, who may have a learning disability. She is very bright, and she exhibits several characteristics that make me wonder if she has such a problem. She has difficulty with the following: handwriting (writes above and below the line, letters are of disproportionate size, letter shapes are inconsistent, and looped letters such as "g" are often above the line); silent "e" (she often pronounces it); reversals (occasionally reverses letters and sounds); pronunciation; and grammar and syntax (makes more of these errors than most other students). Communication with her, however, is not as difficult as it could be because she is very outgoing and uses body language freely.

In high school in China, she says she did well in math, Chinese and biology, and she did average work in history and geography. Her first job was as a stitcher in a factory; later she was a bank bookkeeper for three years. When she came to the U.S. six years ago she began ESL classes. Her jobs have included pricing and packaging in a necktie factory and baking and cashiering

in a supermarket; she was a kitchen helper in a fast food restaurant and a layout artist for a flag business. When she was laid off, she entered the Prevocational Skills Training Program at AACA; later she entered the Office Systems Training Program. I teach in both programs, so she had been my student for nearly a year.

Method

The approach Jessica Spohn and I developed and piloted is twofold: one part involves administering a checklist; the other uses the seven intelligences in teaching and reinforcing grammar.

For the first part, I made some vocabulary changes in the checklist in *7 Kinds of Smart.* (See original version in the Appendix.) In class I explained the purpose of the checklist to my students and introduced the seven categories. After I picked a number of questions as examples and discussed them, the students began to fill out the form in class so that I could answer any initial questions they might have. Then I asked them to do it for homework so they could have more time to think about the questions.

Table 1:
Teaching Difficult Concepts Found in the Multiple Intelligences Checklist

These are some of the ways the more difficult concepts were taught. You will find other ways, too.

Bird's-eye view: Use an illustration, such as a photograph of part of a city taken from up in a tall building.

Brainteaser: Word puzzles and visual puzzles in a book such as *Challenge!* illustrate this very well.

Logical thinking: Also known as common sense. Logic can also be illustrated with concrete examples such as a detective trying to solve a crime.

Patterns: You need to illustrate different types of patterns. For example: 1) Weather—mild winters for several years, followed by difficult winters; 2) Behavior—employee only out "sick" on Mondays, with boyfriend (or girlfriend) very "busy" lately; 3) Number—What's the missing number in this sequence: 1 2 4 7 11 __ 22 29?; 4) Migration and geography—looking at maps showing cultural diffusion or patterns of cancer distribution, for example.

Measured, categorized, analyzed: Migration and geography maps (above) can also be used to illustrate this.

Sample/typical items from this checklist include:

- My conversation includes frequent references to things that I've read or heard.
- I believe that almost everything has a logical, scientific, sensible explanation.
- I need to touch things in order to learn more about them.
- I often make tapping sounds or sing little melodies while working, studying, or learning something new.

A few days later I asked the students if they had had trouble with any questions, and I got no reply. However, when they filled out their score sheets, I found that most of them had high scores of only five or less in each area (with eight being the highest and six being an indicator of strength in an area). At this point, they began to voice concern over the questions. I then explained each item individually but found that some concepts needed a lot of examples (Table 1).

When we returned to the checklist a few days later, I felt the students now had an improved understanding. After tallying their scores (see Table 2), we brainstormed for ideas on how to choose a suitable job by using their strongest intelligences. We tried to combine two or more intelligences into one job (for example, musical, bodily-kinesthetic and interpersonal: dance teacher, coach, physical therapist, or salesperson). We also brainstormed how to use their strengths to enhance their ESL ability. Since the class as a whole was strong in bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, we took the example of developing vocabulary by first picking up an object, such as a wallet, and then describing it as many ways as possible as you handle and inspect it.

This leads to the second part of the approach. To apply the multiple intelligences theory, I planned a cluster of activities, done over several days, focused on each of the seven intelligences, combining one or two at a time. The grammar point I chose to teach was present continuous. Present continuous is used to describe an ongoing activity, so therefore ongoing activities were part of some lessons. As the "-ing" form is used to indicate future, this was also included. In Table 3, I describe how I incorporated the seven intelligences into teaching the grammar.

Results

Doing the inventory without much pre-teaching, I learned the hard way what not to do. Because I had to go back and reexamine quite a few questions with the students, I decided I would revise my approach the next time. I'll teach vocabulary first. Then I'll do one group of questions at a time. The students will meet in small groups to discuss the questions. Each group will have

Table 2:
Score Sheet for the
Multiple Intelligences Checklist

Intelligence	Number of items checked	If 6 or more, check here
Linguistic	_____	_____
Logical-Mathematical	___	_____
Bodily-Kinesthetic	_____	_____
Musical	_____	_____
Interpersonal	_____	_____
Intrapersonal	_____	_____
Spatial	_____	_____

• My best intelligences are (write in order from highest to lowest):

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

• Possible occupations in which I could use these intelligences are:

_____
_____
_____

• This is how I might use these special intelligences to help myself learn ESL:

_____
_____
_____

• These are some other questions or comments I have:

_____
_____
_____

Table 3:
Lesson Plans Using Seven Intelligences

• *Musical:* (a) Students were given the words to "I'm Walkin'" (which I played on a record player) and "Winter Wonderland" (which I played on the piano), and then we sang the songs. (b) I pointed out the rhythm of language in general, and then pointed out the rhythm in present continuous. The subject and helping verb, whether contracted or not, are held for a slightly longer beat, compared with the verb and its -ing ending. For example: "you're/talking" (two beats/two beats); or "I am/wonder-ing" (two beats/two beats). I tapped the beat with a pencil while we practiced.

• *Logical-Mathematical/Interpersonal:* Students were divided into groups of three. Each group was given two puzzles to figure out: a visual puzzle and a word puzzle. They were clearly challenged by this activity. The teacher would ask each group questions such as, "What are you doing?" and the response might be, "We're trying to see where this goes."

• *Spatial-Visual/Bodily-Kinesthetic:* (a) We watched a video of Jackie Gleason's television shows which featured his different characters, such as Ralph Kramden and the Poor Soul. The students loved it. From time to time they were asked, "What's he doing now?" or "What's he going to do next?" and they responded appropriately. (b) Following this the students worked in pairs, each pair having a prop (such as a bowler hat, camera, paintbrush, magnifying glass, jigsaw puzzle). Each pair devised a short scene using the prop. When presenting it to the class, the class was asked questions such as, "What is she doing now?" In my class, the Jackie Gleason video seemed to be a good warm-up for this.

• *Intrapersonal:* The students were asked to begin their journals by answering, "What are you doing now to help yourself with English?" and "What are you going to do to help yourself in the future?" While some forgot about using present continuous, it still got them to plan on specific things to do to improve in English.

a leader—a student whose English is superior to the others. They will be allowed to do some talking in Chinese or Vietnamese—when needed—to help them understand some difficult concepts. The students will be encouraged to share experiences pertaining to each question. Each group will decide on one point to share with the whole class; perhaps it might be the discovery that they all share a similar interest or maybe they figured out a difficult item.

Will I continue to do this with future classes? Yes, I plan to. This time was just for getting started and trying things out. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, I plan to use each group of questions as the core of small group discussions. This should help me to achieve the two criteria: (1) The testing (and pre-testing) process will in itself be a learning experience for ESL; and (2) I think this pre-testing approach will then improve the reliability of the data.

An analysis of scores (Table 4) showed logical-mathematical intelligence to be the best for the group as a whole, followed by bodily-kinesthetic and then linguistic, while the spatial intelligence was the lowest. While I can't explain why the logical-mathematical results are so high, I do know that most of the students we admit to this program do very well in the TABE test sections on math computation and math word problems. However, because of the weaknesses in introducing the MI checklist this time, I am somewhat skeptical of all the results. Nevertheless, even with this possible margin of error, the TABE test results may indeed correlate with this part of the MI checklist.

How did all of this affect the concerns I had for my one potential learning disabled student? As discussed earlier, I'm not sure of the accuracy of all the students' scores. With this in mind, MI testing for this student revealed her scores to be: 5 in logical-mathematical, 5 in linguistic, 4 in bodily-kinesthetic, and 4 in spatial. I consider her to be strong in the interpersonal area, although she only rated herself as 3. Because she (and many other students) had high scores of only 5, I was forced to accept these as strengths. She felt that the test results accurately portrayed her.

If it seems odd that linguistic intelligence should be relatively high in a person who has trouble learning a new language, it is important to remember that she is expressive, has a lot to say (although she still has some trouble saying some of it), and she likes to read.

I discussed with this student my impression that she may have a learning disability, and at the same time I also described it as "other learning abilities." She was happy to be part of this study. She pointed out that her auditory comprehension has improved a lot since first enrolling in Prevoc almost a year ago. However, her oral and written communication have not kept up. She says she listens to her tape journal a lot, listening to my comments and practicing.

Conclusion

Which areas worked best? Of course, linguistic intelligence was a part of each activity. The question concerns how many other intelligences were also a part of each. Interpersonal intelligence was used the most and was well received. Also known as cooperative learning, it is already pretty widely valued and practiced. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence was used to emphasize speaking with expression, as well as for role play. This area has a lot more potential for teaching English. Musical activities were well received but I incorporated them the least often. And whether I used these activities to the best advantage, I'm not sure.

Table 4: Distribution of Intelligences

	Student #										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
Linguistic	5	5	5	3	5	5	8	4	6	5	51
Log.-Math	7	9	8	6	5	3	6	8	3	6	61
Bod.-Kin.	7	5	6	5	4	5	6	6	3	5	52
Musical	6	5	8	2	2	2	6	7	2	3	43
Interpers.	6	7	5	6	3	4	4	6	1	4	47
Intrapers.	9	5	4	4	4	3	6	7	3	5	50
Spatial	4	1	5	2	5	3	5	4	1	4	34

Logical-mathematical intelligence was not used enough in specific activities. However, my general teaching approach strongly stresses the use of common sense. Cloze exercises are a good example of this. Intrapersonal intelligence was tapped with the use of journals and tapes, as well as report-writing which requires the students to reflect on outreach activities. In addition, every three to four weeks students complete a self-evaluation form.

Spatial (visual) intelligence was felt by most students to be a weakness, but this is no reason to neglect it (as I think I did). Suitable activities can strengthen it and enhance this important dimension to mastering English. Walking around with a map and questions can help students learn the different uses of "in," "on," and "at," for example.

How do I feel this worked out? I believe I've made a good start in using this approach. More needs to be done. My initial presentation to the students will be revised. I'll include more hands-on activities. However, I think my students have a better understanding of themselves now as a result of this. And I feel confident, as I improve this approach, that any LD students in my class will definitely find learning English easier.

If your students are too low a level of English, does this mean that you can't use this approach? No, of course not. And this leads me to the main point I want to make: Some teachers also may not have the time to administer this checklist, together with pre-teaching it. In such cases, I would recommend incorporating these seven intelligence areas into your lessons as much as possible—because you will be reaching the different strengths of your students.

ESL teachers can address multiple intelligences in non-threatening ways. Some related ESL activities for a class could include: (a) puzzles, such as: insert the missing number: 11 12 14 __ 26 42 (speaking; present tense); (b) do some stretching and deep breathing exercises in class (listening; imperative); and (c) have students read and listen to books on tape (reading, listening). Of course, these activities only begin to scratch the surface. Many others can be found in *7 Kinds of Smart*, by Thomas Armstrong (Plume, 1993) as well as *Challenge!*, by Charlie Rice (Hallmark Editions, 1968).

A general principle in special needs education is to use *multisensory* techniques. Multiple intelligences theory is an extension of this principle. So use it and have fun! Ω

Appendix: Multiple Intelligences Checklist

Check those statements that apply in each intelligence category:

Linguistic Intelligence

___ Books are very important to me.
___ I can hear words in my head before I read, speak, or write them down.
___ I get more out of listening to the radio or a spoken-word cassette than I do from television or films.
___ I show an aptitude for word games like Scrabble, Anagrams, or Password.
___ I enjoy entertaining myself or others with tongue twisters, nonsense rhymes, or puns.
___ Other people sometimes have to stop and ask me to explain the meaning of the words I use in my writing and speaking.
___ English, social studies, and history were easier for me in school than math and science.
___ When I drive down a freeway, I pay more attention to the words written on billboards than to the scenery.
___ My conversation includes frequent references to things that I've read or heard.
___ I've written something recently that I was particularly proud of or that earned me recognition from others.

Other Linguistic Strengths:

Logical-Mathematical Intelligence

___ I can easily compute numbers in my head.
___ Math and/or science were among my favorite subjects in school.
___ I enjoy playing games or solving brainteasers that require logical thinking.
___ I like to set up little "what if" experiments (for example, "What if I double the amount of water I give to my rosebush each week?")

___ My mind searches for patterns, regularities, or logical sequences in things.
___ I'm interested in new developments in science.
___ I believe that almost everything has a rational explanation.
___ I sometimes think in clear, abstract, wordless, imageless concepts.
___ I like finding logical flaws in things that people say and do at home and work.
___ I feel more comfortable when something has been measured, categorized, analyzed, or quantified in some way.
Other Logical-Mathematical Strengths:

Spatial Intelligence
___ I often see clear visual images when I close my eyes.
___ I'm sensitive to color.
___ I frequently use a camera or camcorder to record what I see around me.
___ I enjoy doing jigsaw puzzles, mazes, and other visual puzzles.
___ I have vivid dreams at night.
___ I can generally find my way around unfamiliar territory.
___ I like to draw or doodle.
___ Geometry was easier for me than algebra in school.
___ I can comfortably imagine how something might appear if it were looked down upon from directly above in a bird's-eye view.
___ I prefer looking at reading material that is heavily illustrated.
Other Spatial Strengths:

Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence
___ I engage in at least one sport or physical activity on a regular basis.
___ I find it difficult to sit still for long periods of time.
___ I like working with my hands at concrete activities such as sewing, weaving, carving, carpentry, or model-building.
___ My best ideas often come to me when I'm out for a long walk or a jog, or when I'm engaged in some other kind of physical activity.
___ I often like to spend my free time outdoors.
___ I frequently use hand gestures or other forms of body language when conversing with someone.
___ I need to touch things in order to learn more about them.
___ I enjoy daredevil amusement rides or similar thrilling physical experiences.
___ I would describe myself as well coordinated.
___ I need to practice a new skill rather than simply reading about it or seeing a video that describes it.
Other Bodily-Kinesthetic Strengths:

Musical Intelligence
___ I have a pleasant singing voice.
___ I can tell when a musical note is off-key.
___ I frequently listen to music on radio, records, cassettes, or compact discs.
___ I play a musical instrument.
___ My life would be poorer if there were no music in it.
___ I sometimes catch myself walking down the street with a television jingle or other tune running through my mind.
___ I can easily keep time to a piece of music with a simple percussion instrument.
___ I know the tunes to many different songs or musical pieces.
___ If I hear a musical selection once or twice, I am usually able to sing it back fairly accurately.
___ I often make tapping sounds or sing little melodies while working, studying, or learning something new.
Other Musical Strengths:

Interpersonal Intelligence

___ I'm the sort of person that people come to for advice and counsel at work or in my neighborhood.
___ I prefer group sports like badminton, volleyball, or softball to solo sports such as swimming and jogging.
___ When I have a problem, I'm more likely to seek out another person for help than attempt to work it out on my own.
___ I have at least three close friends.
___ I favor social pastimes such as Monopoly or bridge over individual recreations such as video games and solitaire.
___ I enjoy the challenge of teaching another person, or groups of people, what I know how to do.
___ I consider myself a leader (or others have called me that).
___ I feel comfortable in the midst of a crowd.
___ I like to get involved in social activities connected with my work, church, or community.
___ I would rather spend my evenings at a lively social gathering than stay at home alone.

Other Interpersonal Strengths:

Intrapersonal Intelligence

___ I regularly spend time alone meditating, reflecting, or thinking about important life questions.
___ I have attended counseling sessions or personal growth seminars to learn more about myself.
___ I have opinions that set me apart from the crowd.
___ I have a special hobby or interest that I keep pretty much to myself.
___ I have some important goals for my life that I think about on a regular basis.
___ I have a realistic view of my strengths and weaknesses (borne out by feedback from other sources).
___ I would prefer to spend a weekend alone in a cabin in the woods rather than at a fancy resort with lots of people around.
___ I consider myself to be strong willed or independent minded.
___ I keep a personal diary or journal to record the events of my inner life.
___ I am self-employed or have at least thought seriously about starting my own business.

Other Intrapersonal Strengths:

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23

Using the Multisensory Game "WORDS"

Janice Forcellese

A teacher is one who makes himself progressively unnecessary. — Anon.

I consider myself fortunate in that I have had a wealth of experiences working with learners from varied age groups, ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic levels in physically diverse learning environments. In the 24 years I've been a teacher, I tutored Mass. Rehab. (Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission) clients who were considered dyslexic, vision impaired, hearing impaired, deaf and behavior-disordered; I've also taught at the elementary, high school and community college level. From the onset of my career, I have always cared about learner progress.

Discrepancies in actual performance exhibited by learners of any age have aroused my curiosity and forced me to question my selection and implementation of curriculum, materials and methods. Many times I've questioned why some students had problems learning when I thought I was varying the methods and allowing for everyone's learning style. Though I tried many different methods, I quickly realized that there was no one program, no matter how excellent, for all students and that some programs just don't work for students, regardless of age or environment.

Through the years, just as my job title changed, so did my attitude toward learning styles. I came to the realization that knowing the learner as an individual with cognitive and affective needs could help identify the discrepancy between achievement and potential. However I was still plagued by how to reformulate goals and revise instructional procedures.

About four years ago, I decided to enroll in a graduate program focusing on learners with special needs. I took courses that described the medical and behavioral reasons for learning problems. Until this period, I had used visual and auditory aids in the classroom, but after going to graduate school for special education certification, I became aware of kinesthetic and tactile techniques. Some students learn visually or aurally, but there are other students who like hands-on activities and *need* them. Fernald's multisensory VAKT (Visual-Auditory-Kinesthetic-Tactile) system was heartily endorsed by my graduate school professors.

VAKT, for those who aren't familiar with the approach, was documented by Grace Fernald in her classic book, *Remedial Techniques in Basic School Subjects* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1943). Although originally designed with developmentally-disabled and mildly retarded children in mind, Fernald's followers have found her approach highly flexible. At the core of the approach are whole words that the learner becomes acquainted with through speaking, seeing, and tracing. Thus, visual and auditory memory are engaged, as is tactile memory, for the nerve centers in the fingers are highly sensitive. Typically, the tracing should happen with the paper at arm's length. With this distance to overcome, all the arm muscles are engaged in the task, thereby activating kinesthetic memory as well.

What happened in my class when I began integrating multi-sensory teaching and how I did it is included in this paper. For teachers who are interested in using kinesthetic and tactile means to augment the curriculum, the description of my vocabulary class, where the multisensory approach, "WORDS," was central to the curriculum, may be helpful. Furthermore, with WORDS in place, I began to wonder how I could address some of the group dynamics and assessment issues within the structure of my program. For various reasons, I was able to read and research, but not implement my new ideas during the summer of 1994. I have recorded what I learned here in the hope that others as well as I may be able to take WORDS one step further.

Context

At Employment Connections Inc., I taught a beginning ESL class once a week for ninety minutes. This ESL class consisted of fifteen students varying in language background, educational background and social background. ECI served Russians, Bosnians, Vietnamese, and Cambodians in this class. Though they came to ECI four days a week for four hours a day, my job was introducing, reviewing, and evaluating weekly vocabulary. Meeting the needs of every learner in the class with only a weekly meeting was a challenge! Thus, I decided to design a word game in which all learners would be exposed to vocabulary and have the chance to assimilate it through their senses.

Method

Originally I taught vocabulary by flashing words, saying them, having the students say them and placing the words on a board where students could see and copy them. This uses primarily the visual and auditory modes. Imagine expanding this *look* and *hear* approach to all four modalities.

To play WORDS, each student needs a game board. Make one by using a legal-sized sheet of paper. Draw lines to make five columns down and six rows across. Write W O R D S in the first row across the top. You also need on hand lots of post-it-note-sized pieces of paper (25 per participant).

The teacher reads 25 words from individual cards, flashing each one before the students. The students look, listen, repeat the words, and write each one as it appears on one of their 25 slips of paper. Students then shuffle their pile of 25 words and copy each word into one of the blocks on the game board grid.

When everyone is done, the teacher takes her stack of flash cards and begins to flash words one by one. The students have to locate the words on their own board and mark them with chips or pennies. Like BINGO, the first person with five in a row, in a column or diagonally across the board wins. I always post a congratulations sign with the date and names of the winners of the day.

Students' Reactions

I observed my students as they copied the words from their cards to their gameboards. One student, O., tended to take the dictated words and use them exactly in the order I had read them. Another student, M., liked cards, so she liked to shuffle a great deal before she put her words on the game board. I noticed once that L. left a blank space on her board. She lost track of which words she had copied and which she hadn't. Other students helped her track down the missing word because they were eager to play!

One of the results of using WORDS was the increased confidence students felt. After playing the game, they didn't become visibly upset by writing, spelling, or dictation tasks based on the vocabulary.

Conclusion

I think we all benefited from the individualized approach in WORDS. The game incorporated immediate feedback and self-correction. WORDS has proven very flexible. Students can take their slips of paper home for study. The teacher can use the game board for spelling and dictation or the students can quiz each other using it. WORDS works in one-to-one settings, as well as in small group or whole classroom settings. When 25 words has seemed too many for the students or for the time we have, I've used nine words and asked students to make new game boards with fewer rows and columns. Once the words are familiar, the slips of paper or gameboards can be used as the basis for a story or as answers to comprehension quesions. The teacher can act as a leader or change roles with the students.

What I'd like to do in the future is to incorporate portfolios in my class. While I could see progress, and my students were pleased with the class and as a group graduated either from the program or into higher levels, we could have used portfolios as a way to structure individual conferences. Each student's gameboard could have gone into his or her folder until we figured out as a group how to set criteria for evaluating progress. Perhaps over time we could have documented changes in comfort level, speed, and risk-taking, for example. I particularly look forward to using portfolios as a way of comparing strengths to areas of concern.

As I indicated, WORDS is a fairly individualized approach. A student does not have to cooperate or communicate with others in order to create the gameboard or to win. In some cases, students might cooperate, as they did when one student was holding the whole class back. I wished to extend WORDS from a multisensory experience to a multicultural one as well. Although ESL students from different historical, religious, language and cultural backgrounds sit together in class, they don't necessarily naturally engage with each other beyond superficial greetings. My students have often made new friends with people who speak their own first language, but they often don't extend their social networks to include speakers of other languages.

I thought I could encourage communication among students of different language groups if I trained higher level students as peer tutors. My plan was to match higher level students from one cultural and language background with a lower level student or students with a different background. I thought that training the higher level students would empower them. My own role would shift to that of consultant as their roles

became to help plan and design activities. WORDS could be one part of a curriculum that would include tutors as recorders of learners' favorite poems and language experience stories and as assistants in math and writing assignments. Of all these things, facilitating WORDS is one of the easier places for a new tutor to start, especially one who has been in my class and who has participated in and perhaps even facilitated the game with me and his or her peers. The spirit of the game would have opened more lines of communication among speakers of other languages than had previously existed in my class. Unfortunately, my classes at ECI were abruptly interrupted and I couldn't carry through this plan as I imagined it. It remains, however, a priority for me to try when I am again teaching two levels of adult ESL.

I encourage all teachers to include tactile and kinesthetic learning opportunities to go along with their visual and auditory teaching methods. VAKT can work at all levels of the curriculum for acquisition of new spoken as well as written vocabulary. An application of the VAKT theory like WORDS can serve multiple purposes for an ESL teacher interested in assessment and building a community of learners as well as individuals' progress. Ω

Starting to Read: A Dyslexic Experience

Ilda Montoya

she's half-notes scattered
without rhythm/
no tune
sing her sighs
sing the song of her possibilities
— Ntozake Shange

Risk! Risk anything! Care no more for the opinions of others, for those voices. Do the hardest thing on earth for you. Act for yourself. Face the Truth.
— Katherine Mansfield

Stupid, retarded, ignorant, these are words that echo in Avery's mind, words she uses to explain her learning experiences from early childhood until high school when she decided to give up on learning and drop-out of school. Every time she attempted to read stories in class to other students, whether elementary, middle or high school, she hesitated, listened for a whisper from other students wanting to help, or if she couldn't read the words from left to right, she read from right to left, compounding her inability to read. Soon after she left high school, she denied having a reading problem, blocked out any visible signs that she couldn't cope in a classroom-type situation in which she would expose herself to more ridicule. However, certain circumstances forced her to confront her personal reading issues—her children began asking her to read to them and her aunt asked her to read a poem during a wedding at which Avery's family would be present. Though Avery denied having the nerve to stand in front of a crowd, she was creating excuses to hide her actual reading ability. As embarrassing and as vulnerable as she was, Avery decided to return to school.

When Avery stepped into the classroom, she had no idea what to expect from the other adults whom she assumed had similar learning experiences. With her first attempt at reading aloud for the first time in fifteen years, Avery mispronounced words, stumbled over words by reading from right to left, and intermittently apologized for not knowing the correct words. Avery didn't understand why she couldn't read until her adult education teacher mentioned she might be dyslexic and referred her to another agency to be evaluated.

It's been ten years since Avery began her first reading trek. Most professionals that Avery remembers in tutoring sessions tried to help her understand what she was seeing when she struggled through often made-up utterances to compensate for words she didn't understand. Teachers and tutors alike created various exercises to help Avery, giving her evaluation tools and asking her to respond to questions. She responded because she thought these procedures would solve the "problem." In a recent conversation with Avery about her early return to adult literacy classes, she said,

> It was nice having different people helping me understand letters and sounds but what I really needed was someone that I could trust. For years, since I was a child, I've always thought what other people said about me was true. I really thought that I was stupid. So I never allowed myself to trust anyone because I was tired of having my feelings hurt.

While Avery may have benefitted from recent tutorial sessions, it was important for her to understand dyslexia as a stumbling block to her learning process and understand the steps she could use to overcome the stigma that became such an overwhelming part of her life. Gillingham's (1993) observations of children with dyslexia show how important it is to explain to the child and family what the child is experiencing when he or she is not a "good" reader. Other supportive elements of Gillingham's research include discussing from a historical and cultural context how reading and writing are different. Although Avery did not develop an understanding of reading until she was thirty years old, she continues to develop strategies for learning to read. Reading for Avery is a process of making connections with her learning needs and coping strategies demonstrated in everyday life, of speaking and developing an understanding that the printed word is a representation of speech.

Writing: Translating Oral Speech

After being lost in the reading world for years, Avery continues to progress in small but important ways. Finally getting over the sense of having to make excuses and for years pretending that she understood the alphabet, vowels, and consonants, now Avery can recognize and remember words. When I first met Avery, however, writing and reading the same words just one day later meant having to start again. Aspects of memory, pronunciation, and forming letters by handwriting were a struggle. Instead of using a hit-and-miss method as had been happening in a classroom of other beginning reading students, I created strategies based on what I considered to be Avery's methods of reading/translating traffic signs, cooking instructions, television advertisements, associating the everyday routines with aspects of learning.

For Avery, speaking is a natural part of her communication system. However, speech when translated into a script form becomes more tedious because transferring the oral system into a script (print/written) system requires knowledge of multiple rules, for Avery the weakest of which is knowing how to form letters while writing. All of the elements of thinking about an idea, speaking, and writing are difficult for Avery to accomplish because she has not mastered the methods for transferring speech to print medium. We spent time discussing the relationship between speaking (oral) and writing (motor skills), then worked through specific examples of speaking, "I went to the store last night," and practiced writing these sentences.

Left to Right: Letter Shapes and Words

During one of our first tutorial sessions, I observed Avery while she wrote the alphabet. She had the ability to say the letters in appropriate order, yet, while writing, she inverted the order of the letters /b/ and /d/, /p/ and /q/, common errors for dyslexic adults. However, after recording her recitation of the alphabet on cassette, making index cards of inverted letters, and finding letters in product labels and supermarket ads, Avery became accustomed to relying on multiple forms of reading materials for learning. While discussing the order of the words in the supermarket ads which were placed from left to right, she developed an understanding of the order of words in sentences. When she attempted to write basic sentences, even though she used invented spelling for many words, she noticed a consistent writing progression from left to right. These early experiences were the beginning of Avery's writing strategies, which include writing sentences she hears from her cassette recorder.

Avery's Tools: A Tape Recorder and a Computer

On several occasions, especially at the beginning of our tutorial sessions held on Fridays for two hours, Avery would come to class with a tape recorder. As she explained, "I have to hear things a few times before I actually understand what I want to say or what I want to write." Because Avery was comfortable with this process, almost all of our conversations about reading were recorded on tape. The following week Avery would take as much time as she needed to listen to words, rewriting the words into a notebook, using a beginning picture dictionary to understand meaning and, during our tutorial sessions, writing sentences using new words.

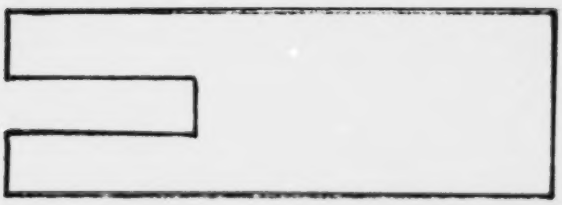
Keystrokes to Literacy (Stone, 1982), a computer-assisted learning resource, is an introductory approach to learning computer functions, and in Avery's learning situation it provides visual training to read from left to right. I created learning opportunities to supplement Avery's instruction. Sentences that Avery wrote into her notebook can be practiced using a word processing program that provides spell check and dictionary tools. Specific exercises can be created on Worksheet Magic, using two and three letter words to construct puzzles, word search exercises, and fill-in-the-blank sentences. Avery continues to use various computer software to improve her reading and writing skills.

Needless Apologies

Avery's emotional insecurities are the most difficult and challenging aspects of each tutorial session. While she does not laugh at herself as often as she did when we first met, she does rush to make the right pronunciation by guessing and then apologizing for getting it wrong. I respond directly by reminding her that it is all right to be wrong, that learning means knowing more about your individual habits, using the one habit that works and changing the habit that does not work. I write short notes while speaking into the cassette recorder to re-pattern an experience, tracing the steps she went through to accomplish and develop her writing and reading. Because we use tapes to assist Avery in the learning process, she can repeat along with the tape, remind herself of the the error, move on to the next challenge, or review when she feels this is necessary.

Reading and Direction

Reading was the most difficult aspect of the four basic skills areas— reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Avery had the habit of misreading words, making excuses while laughing at herself for not knowing two-letter words then becoming visibly frustrated when I interrupted her to make oral corrections. The first challenge was helping Avery get over the habit of reading from right to left. I cut a small one inch rectangular square out of the left side of a 3x5 index



card. Then I asked Avery to place the open portion of the index card over the beginning of the sentence. As I expected, she began to turn the card around so that the open portion of the index card was on the right. I observed her comparing the sentences she wrote in her notebook with the sentences in the basic reader. After letting out a big "OH!," Avery recognized the relationship between her written work with the words in the reader. The index cards were also useful in assisting Avery with pronouncing consonant blends, recognizing vowel patterns /ou/, /oo/, /ie/, /ea/, and spelling. Reading along with an audio tape while following the words in the reader that accompanied the tape was and continues to be a valuable learning experience. Another valuable learning environment involves family literacy. Books on tape are readily accessible at the public library, and Avery could read along with her children and replay the tape at various intervals without feeling embarrassed.

Conclusion

Avery experiences both phonological problems which make pronouncing vowel sounds difficult as well as naming problems, difficulties which make recognizing sight words and recalling words she knows a challenge. In her everyday life, she has excellent analytical skills. Her learning task is to find a way to draw on those strengths to aid her in interpreting complex information. I expect she will have the opportunity to develop additional strategies to accomplish this goal. It is unfortunate that Avery did not have the opportunity to develop other skills besides laughing at herself and making excuses for not knowing how to read. I believe Avery's progress is due to individual observation of her reading problems, creating a positive language to overcome her sense of low self-esteem in reading environments, assessing the approaches she used to compensate for word patterns, and then individualizing both short and long-term strategies to change the problems.

People like Avery do get lost. But are the teachers and family members just as lost in terms of providing alternative ways of coming to know how to read? I believe the reading process involves more than the antiseptic environment of the classroom. Stages of reading development are important, and perhaps whole language-plus is additionally important, but these teaching/learning environments are a small part of the adult's overall world. The adult who reads with some difficulty, whether learning disabled, lacking in educational background, or a second language learner, still has the ability to speak, express ideas, and offer feedback in communicative environments. The process of learning to read for these adults must connect the tradition of learning to read in the classroom environment with the innate speaking abilities which the adult often takes for granted. Not only is it important for adult learners to recognize what abilities they already have to cope with such things as reading traffic signs or reading supermarket ads, they must also learn how to transfer their knowledge of everyday language into a representative script. For Avery, this is a strong beginning. Ω

29

The Penalties of Illiteracy for the Non-Reading Detainee

Betsey Webber

You pay a great deal too dear for what's given freely.

— William Shakespeare

In the society of the incarcerated, illiteracy is an additional penalty. Although the social dynamics of the prison system can be viewed as a microcosm of the world outside the prison walls, incarceration carries with it a unique set of rules and a currency based on the giving and taking of favors.

Superiority of an individual is partly determined by fulfilling the information needs of the prison population. Conversely, inferiority is acquired by being one of the needy. Inside this system, it is a powerful asset to be able to interpret information and a liability to have to need it and rely on someone else to get it. To ask for information and receive it constitutes a favor. That requires a payback at some point, making even the most basic of skills a survival issue. This interaction gives weighted relevance to reading skills in prison. Giving a non-reader an alternative solution to the onerous and loaded task of reading promotes self-esteem and independence.

Education at the Suffolk County Jail

Suffolk County Jail is a pre-trial facility in downtown Boston. Since 1988 the jail has had an education department that offers programs in ABE, life skills and ESL. All eligible detainees who choose to participate in the education program are given the standardized TABE test (Test of Adult Basic Education). Detainees whose tests result in a 0-3 grade reading level are placed in the low-level ABE class. Generally, the class consists of 3-8 students, with fluctuations due to court dates, release, illness, and visits. At any given time, there will be several students who are on the 0 grade reading level, essentially non-readers. These students stay an average of three to four months in the class and are mostly American-born, English speaking students. These students are adults who have developed their own systems of coping. Because thus far they have acquired almost no reading skills and there is a time limitation, it is beneficial to assume that they have some degree of learning difference. Therefore, the approach that seems appropriate is to teach them what they need at this particular point in time.

A Positive Approach

What educational experience can be given to the non-reading students, considering their short stay at the jail? Minimally, a positive educational experience focusing on survival skills and self-esteem can be provided. Literacy needs in the corrections system are specific to the institution. Requests of the administration for social services, legal services, medical department and the canteen must be made in writing and reading is required for some procedures.

One of the simplest tasks, it would seem, is reading and ordering from the canteen list. Detainees can purchase items from the jail's canteen, debiting their account, if they have money in it. The canteen functions as a store but there is no opportunity for visual selections. A written list of personal care products, writing materials and snack foods is available in the detainee's unit. (See Appendix A.) They make their selection and write it on a printed slip (Appendix B). For the non-reader who has no means of recognizing words on a randomly organized list, there are several options: ask the officer; ask another detainee; watch to see what others are having and then ask someone to spell the item. All of these choices not only negatively affect self-esteem but put the non-reader in the position of being beholden to someone else. That request creates a multitude of problems in the corrections system because it requires some kind of payback for the favor in return.

It seemed that working with the canteen list would be helpful to students. First, I reorganized the canteen list according to category (Appendix D), using broad categories with simple, small word headings that were underlined and in bold typeface such as CHIPS, HAIR ITEMS, CANDY, and OTHER ITEMS (instead of "miscellaneous"). The list was reworked until everything fell into a specific category with as few exceptions as possible (i.e., playing cards and stamped envelopes listed under OTHER ITEMS) and then alphabetized within categories.

When the old list was shown to the non-readers they were unable to find items. Comments such as, "I don't know what I'm looking at" and "I order the same known things" were common. They recognized known products only if they recognized the spelling of a familiar product name like "Snickers." They had a higher rate of success on the newly revised list by looking for category words they knew, like candy, chips, etc. The 2-3 grade level students had very little trouble with the new list and felt comfortable locating any item once they had familiarized themselves with the headings.

Success for the Non-Reader

My students and I then took this list a few steps further.They brought in wrappers from their actual canteen purchases. I mounted them on poster board and photocopied them in color (Appendix C). The color photocopies were cut out and the prices and names of products were enlarged on a word processor, then put in acetate sleeves in a loose leaf notebook.

The list was then color-coded according to four major groups—food (green), drinks (yellow), personal care (blue), or miscellaneous (red)— with individual items coded according to the appropriate group. Photocopied items were organized by category in the notebook, with the written list in each section. The specific category was highlighted with the appropriate color-coded dots. This helped to further clarify which items were to follow. When the students were shown the list of actual product pictures, they had no trouble whatsoever in determining what they wanted to put on their lists. One non-reading student said that looking at the product pictures "was easier because you can see what you're ordering." Their pleasure was obvious in accomplishing what seems like such a simple task.

Although students were always able to locate most items, color was clearly a cue in helping them recognize familiar items. The same pictures in black and white photocopies were not as recognizable. Without color recognition, the students had to rely on decoding techniques, which for the non-reader is a difficult task. In the end it was clear that the list accompanied by black and white photocopies was more successful than the reorganized canteen list alone, yet less successful than the list accompanied by the color photocopies.

An additional feature of this process is exposure to organization. By seeing the product photocopies and then locating the items on the written list under clear categories, the non-reader may make the connection that lists such as menus, classified ads and housing ads usually have categorical order.

Achievement and Self-Esteem

Because non-reading adults carry all the inherent emotional baggage of being unable to read in a very literate society and since their self-esteem is always at issue, small achievements become extremely important. The multiple challenges to the adult learner are well known. When those are added to the possibilities of learning differences as well as the emotional burdens of impending trials and the psychological stress of being incarcerated, these challenges may seem insurmountable to the detainee. All these factors affect learning activities and usually create major distractions.

However, using visual imagery to focus on survival skills that directly affect their stay in the facility gives detainees a small measure of success and supports them in becoming independent of other detainees. At the least, they come away with a sense that further education might be possible as well as helpful.

In the 1990's many institutions are making changes to accommodate clients or workers with disabilities. While my students were not necessarily diagnosed as learning disabled, this project allowed me to engage them in a reading task that both accommodated their learning differences and possibly added new reading strategies to their repertoire.

It is hoped that solutions such as using a visual or highly organized canteen list can be incorporated into daily living at the jail and that institutions of all types will be mindful of the literacy needs of the non-readers.

Note: Since the research and writing of this article in August, detainees can now make verbal requests to see a caseworker or for legal services, eliminating not only a difficult writing task but also another barrier for the non-reader. Ω

Appendix A: Original Canteen List

CANTEEN ITEM PRICE LIST

(MENS)

CIGARETTES (PACK)	$1 80
CIGARETTES (CARTON)	18 00
NEWPORT	
MARLBORO	
PALL MALL	
CAMEL	
LUCKY STRIKE	
WINSTON	
KOOLS	
GARCIA VEGA (5 PKG)	1 50
GARCIA VEGA (LOOSE)	30
TIJUANA SMALLS (10 PKG)	90
COUGH DROPS	60
LEGAL PADS	90
LIFE SAVERS	50
CERTS	50
CANDY	45
SNICKERS	
KIT KAT	
MILKY WAY	
BABY RUTH	
MENTOS	50
IRISH SPRING (SOAP)	85
SOAP DISH	40
CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES	30
OATMEAL COOKIES	30
1 PCKG. SUGAR WAFERS	50
1 PCKG. PECAN TWIRLS	1 00
1 BX (10 PK) CHOC. CHIP COOKIES	1 00
1PK. STRAWBERRY CREME VANILLA CREME OR BANANA CREME COOKIES	50
CAKES 30 --- 50	
CUPCAKES	55
SMART FOOD POPCORN	25
COFFEE CAKE	55
HONEY BUNS	55
APPLE PIES	55
BROWNIES	30
CHOCOLATE DONUTS	55
MICROWAVE INSTANT LUNCH (SHRIMP, BEEF, CHICKEN)	75
SARA LEE DANISH (APPLE, CHEESE, RASPBERRY)	55
POUND CAKE	55

HONEY SPICE CAKE	$ 55
WHITE POWDERED DONUTS	55
PLANTERS PEANUTS	45
AFRO PICK	50
AFRO COMB	50
SMALL COMB	15
PENS	20
COCOA BUTTER LOTION	1 05
BERGAMONT (GREASE)	1 00
VASELINE	85
NOXEMA	1 75
BALSAM SHAMPOO	1 75
DANDRUFF SHAMPOO	1 30
DIAL DEODORANT	1 15
POLY GRIP	1 90
MENNEN SPEED STICK	1 80
POLYDENT TABLETS	1 45
WAVE CAPS	1 85
HAIR BRUSH	1 00
PLAYING CARDS	1 95
TOOTHPASTE	1 45
TOOTHBRUSH	55
BABY OIL	1 75
BABY POWDER	75
AFTA SHAVE	2 45
SHOWER SLIPPERS	1 00
CHEESE & CRACKERS	45
NUTS AND HONEY PEANUTS	45
STAMPED ENVELOPE	29
EAR PLUGS	2 75
POTATO CHIPS (PLAIN)	25
DORITOS	25
FRITOS	25
SHELLED SUNFLOWER SEEDS	45
SOUR CREAM & ONION CHIPS	25
SLIM JIMS	40
KOOL AID PACKETS	75
SINGLE SERVING	
COFFEE PACKETS	20
HOT COCOA PACKETS	20
COFFEE MUGS	70

PRICES SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Appendix B:
Blank Canteen Order Form
To Be Filled Out By Detainee

Nº 002155

ORDER FORM —CANTEEN

please print

NAME _____

CELL # _____ Unit # _____ DATE _____

Please check box if substitution O.K. ☐

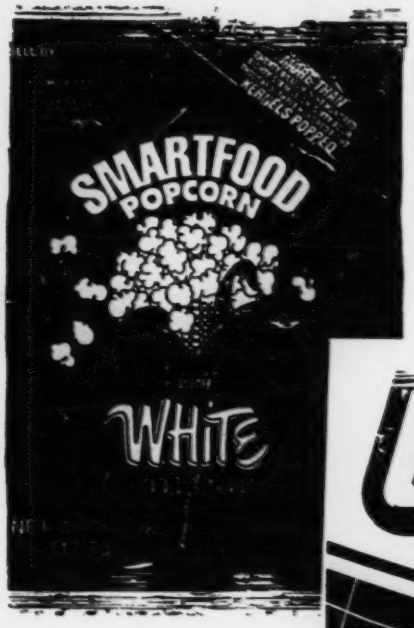
QUANTITY	ITEM DESCRIPTION	PRICE EACH	TOTAL PRICE

RECEIVED BY _____

CASH BALANCE AFTER PURCHASE $ _____

WHITE OFFICE YELLOW INMATE

Chips



Smartfood Popcorn
.25

Sour Cream & Onion Chips
.25

Appendix C:
Page from Visual Canteen List

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Appendix D: Revised Canteen List (With Highlighted Category)

CANTEEN PRICE LIST-MEN'S

SNACKS	
Cheese and crackers	.45
Microwave Instant Lunch	.25
Shrimp, Beef, Chicken	
Oatmeal	.35
Raisin & spice	
Apple & cinnamon	
Slim Jims	.30
CHIPS	
Doritos	.25
Fritos	.25
Plain potato chips	.25
Smartfood Popcorn	.25
Sour Cream & Onion Chips	.25
COOKIES	
Banana Creme-1 package	.50
Chocolate Chip-1 box of 10	1.00
Chocolate chip cookies-2	.30
Oatmeal cookies	.30
Pecan Twirls-1 package	1.00
Strawberry Creme-1 package	.50
Sugar Wafers	.50
Vanilla Creme-1 package	.50
CANDY & NUTS	
Cough drops	.65
Baby Ruth	.45
Certs	.50
Kit Kat	.45
Life Savers	.45
Mentos	.50
Milky Way	.45
Nuts & Honey peanuts	.45
Planter's Peanuts	.45
Reese's	.45
Snickers	.45
Shelled Sunflower Seeds	.45
CAKES, PIES, DOUGHNUTS	
Apple Pie	.45
Brownies	.30
Chocolate Doughnuts	.45
Coffee Cake	45
Cupcakes	45
Honey Buns	45
Sara Lee Danish	45
Apple, Cheese or Raspberry	
Pound Cake	55
White Powdered Doughnuts	45
DRINKS	
Coffee packets	20
Hot cocoa packets	20
Kool Aid Packets	80
Tropical Punch, Grape, Cherry	

SOAPS & SHAMPOO	
Balsam shampoo	1.55
Dandruff shampoo	1.30
Dial deodorant soap	1.05
Dove soap	.90
Irish Spring soap	.85
HAIR PRODUCTS	
Afro comb	.50
Afro pick	.50
Bergamont Grease	1.00
Comb, small	.15
Hair brush	1.00
Wave caps	1.85
TOOTHPASTE, DENTAL	
Polident tablets	2.10
Poly Grip	2.95
Toothbrush	.55
Toothpaste	1.45
COSMETICS	
Afta Shave	2.45
Baby Powder	.75
Baby Oil	1.75
Cocoa Butter Lotion	1.05
Mennen Speed Stick	1.75
Noxema	1.50
Vaseline	.85
OTHER ITEMS	
Ear phones	.29
Coffee mug	.70
Legal pads	.90
Pens	.20
Playing Cards	1.95
Soap dish	.40
Shower slippers	1.00
Stamped envelope	.29
CIGARETTES	
Pack	2.00
Carton	20.00
Camel	
Kools	
Marlboro	
Newport	
Pall Mall	
Winston	
"Prime" generic cigarettes	1.66
regular or menthol	
Garcia Vega-5 pack	1.60
Tijuana Smalls-10 pack	.95

PRICES SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Developing Educational Self-Esteem

Lea Campolo

Identity is not found, the way Pharaoh's daughter found Moses in the bulrushes. Identity is built.

— Margaret Halsey

So many adult learners have learning disabilities, broadly defined as barriers to learning. The disabilities may be psychological or neurological and under these categories occur for many reasons, known or unknown. Despite all of the research on learning disabilities, there is no evidence that learning disabilities can be objectively defined. From what I have observed, a student's self-image contributes to how he or she fares in classroom learning. I think that low self-esteem in learning rather than being able to think of one's self as "smart" affects the ability to perform.

Many of us at Youthbuild agree that past school experiences haunt our students, even in this alternative school setting. The label "learning disabled" may stem from conditioning inside a racist educational system that gives a message to people of color that they historically have not, can not, or will not contribute knowledge to the development of civilizations. By this, I mean both that educators within the system freely use "learning disabled" as a label for children of color and that children of color develop learning disabilities in response to the low expectations and negative messages of the racist educational system. Baggage from the past can interfere with learning new content. For example, a subject area or skill could trigger memories of a traumatic event in a given grade or year of one's life and interfere with learning. Then the student's inability to grasp this content could be interpreted as a learning disability. However, even if we all agreed that this were the case, how can we intervene constructively? All of the Youthbuild staff are considered counselors and we go through training, but our main focus as teachers is to educate in the classroom. I wanted a way to probe my students' histories in a group setting. I wanted to see what would happen to my students' learning potential if I invented tools to divest them of their shame and to reconstruct with them an image of themselves as competent, powerful learners.

It may be helpful to know some of the reasons for which low educational self-esteem was formed, yet it is not possible to know all of the causes and climates. It is very clear to see right away whether a student approaches learning with joy or fear and whether the work we do together has an impact on the student's attitude. In my work with this project, I wanted to concentrate on how to consistently help students to build educational self-esteem and bring out their many intelligences, accomplishments and capabilities.

I am currently managing the educational department in a program called Youthbuild Boston. It is an eleven month program in which 18-24 year olds are offered the opportunity to earn their GED's, develop skills in construction and youth leadership, and perform weekly community service. All of the students come in with a hope that they will get an education and a trades skill. All of the students are African-American or Hispanic students living in Boston. Many have been diagnosed with "learning disabilities" and think of themselves as "slow learners." Many report that not learning about themselves and their cultural histories through the public schools resulted in not feeling positive about their place in the educational system. Many desire a college education, but can't imagine themselves functioning at a high academic level.

Three years ago Youthbuild started an orientation program called "Mental Toughness Training." This helps to focus incoming students on the tasks that will be expected of them throughout the year and to deal with the different components of the program, showing them what could be gained personally and communally through the educational, counseling, and youth development components. The students leave this two-week

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period ready to accept the academic work. They have a belief that they can accomplish anything. And Youthbuild staff have a big job sustaining and developing this self-esteem throughout the duration of the program.

With the foundation set in place I thought about the number of things I could do throughout the year. The tools included here are just a small part in assisting in the healing process of young people. For example, other parts might include daily affirmations of greatness, providing information to students that is immediately useful, and creating a classroom environment where all ideas can be expressed freely and responsibly. I have included here two of the exercises I wrote and a discussion of the experiences I had in using them.

Educational History Survey

One of the exercises was a current and past educational history survey written in two parts (see Appendix A). The current history survey is to be answered after completing the orientation session. The past history survey is to be administered two weeks later in our class entitled "Issues in Education." The survey is done to give both the teacher and student knowledge of the student's educational path and is a tool for further discussion.

I developed the survey because, like every program, we wanted to know a bit about our students. I included some of the basics that the funder would want to know. The other questions just flowed from all the questions in my head, from years of wanting to know. I showed colleagues at work, but I got most of the feedback on the survey from our teacher research group on learning disabilities. I reframed some questions and the order to reflect their suggestions. Their concerns centered on how I was going to implement the interview. I think overall we wanted to write a survey that someone would enjoy filling out. Not every question would be fun, but the questions would open up students to their real issues, rather than carrying over their issues to another place without a chance to unpack them and examine them. The Educational History Survey is a transition tool. Completing the survey would help students realize that this program is a new experience in their education, not a continuation of the negative experiences.

After completing the survey, the student and teacher can have a follow-up dialogue. I would pose such questions as: Did the student know s/he had varied intelligences? and How do you define the word "smart"? The survey will assist students in understanding the talents and skills that they possess and assist the teacher in creating evaluations that are useful and fun. I've found that knowing a student's strengths is important not only for assigning individual work, but also for creating effective small groups. I've noticed that a group that shares compatible learning styles can work together on a project more easily than a group with different learning styles.

Here's one brief "case history" of how I used this survey. In a one-to-one interview I asked the student, J.S., to write in answers to the questions first. He did and I couldn't get him to stop writing. Even after he finished, he wanted to share more. He was pleased that I had asked about his history and this setting was perfect for him to tell about an event that made him feel stupid in front of his peers. The situation was that he had failed the eighth grade and stayed back. During his second year in eighth grade, his basketball team made it to the state championship. Needless to say, the team was very psyched! The day before leaving for the play-offs, each team member had to give information about his education. In J.S.'s interview, it was found that he had been put back and had previously been put back in other grades, making him three years older than his teammates. With this information revealed, the school was disqualified from the play-offs because of his age. Everyone knew it was because of him and he was devastated and considered himself a failure for having failed all of those years. He dropped out the next year, in ninth grade.

When I had J.S. as a student, I had no idea that this incident was the basis of how he felt about himself now. This was the first time that he was telling the story and starting to make connections for himself about life and school. After I read the story, we spoke about it at length. It seemed that he was putting this event behind him and getting a second wind to try harder at what he wanted to do. He started to come to school every day. Previously, he had an attendance problem, and although he did not get the GED in his first year at Youthbuild, he was permitted to enroll for a second year because his motivation to meet his goal was so strong.

Listening to J.S.'s story seemed helpful to him, but the survey gave me information that I could use in the classroom, too. Because J.S.'s motivation was renewed, I wanted to meet him at least halfway. I found out through this interview that J.S. likes to work in a group and that he is strong in kinesthetic learning and receiving information. He seemed to do well in those kinds of settings. With that information, I could structure hands-on, group activities in class. As he experienced success in class, his attendance stayed high.

One Student's History

The second tool is an anonymous student's educational history (see Appendix B) that I give after students are two months into the program. For this exercise, the students are to read the history and to discuss

the student as if they were the teacher meeting this student for the first time. The students are not to answer the last question in writing but may share some of their personal histories with the class.

When I gave students "One Student's History" they were very interested in reading it. They wanted to know who it was and if I knew the person. They thought all different things. Some thought the writer was a staff person. Some thought the writer was a student. Some were convinced the writer was a black male and some thought the writer was a white female. They wanted to know; some pursued me all day. I told them I wouldn't tell. My point was to have them think about their own schooling, and they started to. They talked about dropping out of school in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades and how it was easy to do. At the time, no one really said anything to them and they wished that someone had challenged them. One person said he dropped out in the ninth grade, but had really dropped out in fourth grade—in his head. Leaving school physically was simple because he'd already left emotionally. Not one student's parents were shocked.

They started to talk with each other about the physical and emotional risks of attending school. Someone said that it was safer on the street than in school for him: that was the reason he had quit. Others agreed and said many of the exits of the school were chained shut so if a gangmember saw them and chased them, there was nowhere to go. These students liked school, except they felt safer on the street. Someone reported that he was in a class for mentally retarded students for two years. When another assessment was done, the person was taken out of that class, but he thought his current feelings about himself had a lot to do with his history. After this incident, I made it a policy that no staff person should read a student's school records to them and that if we need past records there had to be a very good reason. As long as our students are currently learning and doing fine, then their past history should be confidential. I want to avoid students being labeled again and having limitations attached to their learning abilities. Whether we believe a record or not, it's too easy for young adults to internalize those labels.

Other questions also generated good discussion. Students were able to put themselves in the mind of a teacher and noted that the person was an individual learner, a definite candidate for college, and good with his or her hands. Then we talked about how families should be involved and have an impact on learning. A lot of them said their own parents weren't involved. They want to be involved in their children's education.

While I had success using "One Student's History" with a small group, I would also try it with a large group, but have the discussions in small groups. For this to work, I would need other staff people so there is a facilitator in each group. I stayed firm about not telling who the subject was because I was interested in their ideas, not who guessed right. That their ideas are important is one of the messages. Since there were no answers, the invitation was open to wonder and argue all day about the gender and ethnic background of the subject. Of course, I will tell teachers who want to know.

Conclusion

I was glad to have facilitated this discussion and to have used the surveys because students began to see me as a person who cared about what had happened to them. They got beyond seeing me as a teacher who wanted everything perfect. Our interactions changed and they were more willing after that to be honest about themselves. At first new students are typically embarrassed about what they don't know. They cover up with demands for harder work and college-level texts. Now they express surprise that we have a course in mind for them. "Wow, how do you guys know us so well?" My wheels are always turning about what I can do in the classroom that will appeal to different learners. I want to know about computers and books on tape. Some trade unions seem to give a spatial relations test, so now I think about that and who needs extra classroom work on this and how to give it. This project has created many, many questions for me to investigate.

What I found was that the students were very ready to answer and discuss the issues that they wrote about. They wanted to share many humorous stories about their schooling as well as discuss some of the sadder events, situations that were both in their control and not in their control. I was able to engage in some dialogues that did result in smiles and a desire to succeed beyond all of the real and perceived obstacles.

As a result of developing and implementing these tools, I am more aware of trying to find students' learning styles instead of focusing so much on their grade levels. While the survey and "One Student's History" hint at multiple intelligences and learning styles, I am experimenting with different inventories that will help me and my students assess their strengths. I like the multiple intelligences survey found in *7 Kinds of Smart*, by Thomas Armstrong. However, I have also found the "CAPSOL Style of Learning Assessment" useful because it's short and gives a concise idea of learning style. (Written by John M. Conrath, Ph.D., and available through Process Associates, 1-800-772-7809.)

Stay tuned for more real life stories as this project unfolds. For now I would say that if teachers could focus on creating time and space for interactions that foster self-esteem and encounters with demons from the past, some of those so-called learning disabilities may disappear or at least improve because a large part

of teaching is not only the academic teaching methods used but the teacher's ability to interact well with the student and to speak and engage in ways that respect the student's history and intelligence. Ω

Appendix A: Educational History Survey

Part 1: My Past History

Name:
Date:

To the student: You are about to write an educational story about yourself. The questions are designed to get you to see:

1) Many of the intelligences that you have.

2) Situations beyond your control—caused by individuals or collectives of individuals (those you would define as both good and bad) that had an impact upon your education.

3) Situations within your control (that you created) that had an impact upon your education.

This will be one tool to your own educational self-discovery and a tool for your teacher to enable her/him to devise education and evaluation plans with you, ultimately leading to your educational success. Please answer the questions on the outline and add anything that you think is significant about your educational history.

Schools attended:

Did you start in nursery school, kindergarten, Headstart, first grade or other?

Describe your very first day of school and what you felt like.

Who are the teachers you remember and why? What do you remember about each grade you were in?

Were there ever any stressful family, friend, or work situations that occurred while you were going to school that you remember (death in family, etc.)?

If there were, how do you think these stressful situations affected your learning?

Did you see your family members reading?

Were there books in your house?

Did you have any particular interests while in school and did you get an opportunity to pursue them?

Did you have any serious accidents or illnesses that kept you out of school?

Did you receive any awards?

What things made you feel proud?

What things were you not proud of?

What was your most stressful school experience?

What was your best school experience?

Were you placed in a special ed class, regular class, or advanced class?

Were you ever labeled with a learning disability?

Were you ever told that you had a vision or hearing problem?

Did you ever make up illnesses or lie to stay out of school on a regular basis? Describe the situation that you wanted to avoid.

Did you graduate?

Did you quit school?

If you quit school, write a little about the day you quit. What conversations did you have with parents, friends, teachers, counselors, yourself, etc.?

Highest grade completed:

Go back to the beginning and reread items 1, 2, and 3, the reasons for this survey. Is there anything else you would like to say?

Part 2: My Current Information

Please finish the sentences:

A teacher is a person that/who

A student is a person that/who

A counselor is a person that/who

What makes me excited about learning is

What gets me anxious about learning is

I might panic in school if

If a teacher likes me I

If you were to be successful, what things would change about your life?

In the last three months I did _____ well.

What is your favorite thing to learn about,and if you were asked to show your knowledge about this how would you show us?

If you could learn one thing and it did not depend upon money, time or any other barriers, what would you like to learn about?

Do you currently have a vision or hearing problem?

Appendix B: One Student's History

I started school in kindergarten. On my first day my father took me but I wouldn't go in the door. He pushed me in and the teacher tried to calm me down. She said I could build with blocks. I built a wall with the blocks and sat behind them and cried all day. When my father came for me at the end of the morning I was still behind the wall. Eventually I got over this and I started to like school especially music time. I still remember two songs I learned in that year.

In first grade I went to a Catholic school and I was put in a class for slow readers. The nuns told my mother that I could not read. I cried a lot that year and would try to read to my mother while she was cooking dinner. I worried all that year that I would never be able to read. I also remember having to eat weird things for lunch like cereal and chocolate milk because we didn't have enough money for regular lunches like other kids got. I also remember a boy in the eighth grade who was sent to my class as punishment for taking off his shoe in class. He had to go to every single class and take off his shoe one hundred times and was crying because he was so embarrassed. My mother took me out of that school and put me in public school for second grade.

In second grade my teacher was Miss White. I liked her a lot. She had a bulletin board with all the sounds of letters. She pointed to the letters and we said them. It was called phonics time. We practiced every day. I learned to like reading because of her.

In third grade my teacher was Mrs. Holmes. She called my mom because I wanted to buy a toy from this girl named Lou Ann. So I took a check from my mom's checkbook and got in a mess of trouble. She embarrassed me in front of the class and I don't remember learning anything from her that year.

In fourth grade my teacher was Mr. Kit. He was my first male teacher and I liked him a lot. He let me do all kinds of projects about what we were studying that weren't out of a book. I was always making visual models of whatever it was we were studying like cuneiform tablets, water irrigation systems, and all kinds of models of the human body. I remember liking models a lot and we didn't have money for me to pursue this so I began to steal money from my father. This was easy to do because a lot of the time he came home drunk and I could take money out of his pants because he wouldn't know what he was missing in the morning.

In fifth grade my teacher was Miss King who later became Mrs. Kane when she married the art teacher. I don't remember much about fifth grade except spilling some paint on Charlene Jackson's dress and she didn't talk to me for the rest of the year.

My sixth grade teacher was Mr. Rosco. I was very bad in math. Alan Sutton was very good and he used to beat everyone else to the answers. Mr. Rosco was frustrated with me because I wasn't getting the math. But I was good in English and won the annual spelling championship. That was a good feeling. I beat Eric Piccard, the class brain, on the word toboggan. The class mobbed me, I won a blue ribbon and a large candy bar.

In seventh grade I was bused to junior high. It was exciting not to be with one teacher. Mrs. Patrick was my English teacher. She used to fall asleep while she was teaching. We threw erasers at her head to wake her up. While she was asleep the boys used to trash the room and play bumper cars with their desks.

In eighth grade a new school was built in my neighborhood so I could walk. It was fancy. That year my best friend died from diabetes. That was hard for the whole school because everyone thought she just had the flu until she went into a coma. Then her parents were charged with neglect but cleared.

In ninth grade we moved to a new city because my father lost his business and our house. He said it was because of the economy. But I always believed that this all happened because he was an alcoholic. I had to leave all of my friends almost overnight. I begged my parents to let me stay with my best friend's family but they wouldn't. I think I was depressed for almost a year and had dreams almost every night of going back to my old school. The new school I had to go to was very bad. I was advanced in some things and in the new school they were just starting those things. I was bored. Also I had to get school lunches and every week in homeroom the poor kids' names were called and we had to go get our lunch passes in front of all of the other students.

The beginning of high school went pretty well. My favorite class was music. My teacher Mr. Curry was the best teacher I ever had and I was glad because I had him for three years. He mostly taught me about discipline necessary for success. I was proud of my accomplishments and wanted my parents to come and see what I was doing at school. But my father was always working or drinking and my mother did not have a winter coat all through my high school years so never once did she come to anything at school. She was also embarrassed to meet my teachers because she needed dental work and would not talk to anyone except us unless it was absolutely necessary. But eleventh and twelfth grades were difficult. We had to do book reports and it was very hard for me to speak in front of the class. I would do anything to get out of this situation. I was bored with school too so I would skip school by getting on a bus and traveling about 50 miles from home without anyone knowing where I was. I walked around in a large downtown area for several weeks. When I got tired of

that I started to go into buildings to see what was what. Then I began going to a state university library and reading about sickle cell anemia. I did a whole research project on it. But finally I got caught for skipping and the principal asked me what I did every day. I told him that I read and wrote about sickle cell anemia. He didn't believe me and I got suspended from school. When I was let back in I skipped a few more times. I barely had enough points to graduate but I did graduate.

There were always stressful situations in my home that affected me at school. Two then three of my brothers were dealing drugs from their room. Every time I came home there were guys in the upstairs hallway buying from my brothers at all hours of the night and day. I couldn't do homework even if I wanted to. Also, my father was an alcoholic and he'd be on a drunk for two or three days at a time. And he'd been stopped for drunk driving several times until finally he had his license taken away. But all through school I used to pray at night that he wasn't dead. And then he'd come home and fight with my mother. And I would wish he were dead and swear at him from my bedroom.

My teachers often gave us group assignments that we'd have to work on outside of school. But I wouldn't do them because I wouldn't let anyone come or even ask to come to my house. Once I had a friend over and my father had come home drunk so I was embarrassed to bring any friends over. If my friends came over for me they'd have to stand on the porch and wait. I wouldn't even let any teachers in the door if they came to talk to my parents. I think school would have been better for me if I could have had friends around like other kids.

I once got nominated for a scholarship in music by my classmates. But they decided not to vote me in for it because my parents were poor and college was not even a possibility for me. I was going to go to the army to further my education but changed my mind the day I was to sign up.

There's a lot more I could say about growing up poor and in an alcoholic family. I'm still learning about how all of that affected my education.

Questions for Discussion

1. What was it like to read this student's history?
2. Are there any connections between the student's personal life and school?
3. What kinds of questions would you like to ask this student?
4. What kinds of things would you expect this student to seek help with?
5. Do you think this student is male or female, rich or poor, white or black?
6. Is this student a good candidate for college?
7. What is this person good at?
8. How much were this student's parents involved in the student's education?
9. What would you say to this student's parents?
10. What was your own school experience like?

Learning Abilities

Lareese Hall

Intelligence is quickness to apprehend and distinct from ability, which is capacity to act wisely on the thing apprehended.

— Alfred North Whitehead

I decided to approach the issue of students not making progress from the perspective of investigating their educational and cultural histories. I saw this as a way to perhaps examine the people in class who did not seem to be making any progress (by my assessment or their own) as well as those who were progressing at a satisfactory level.

I did not want to make a point of saying, "We're doing this because X isn't making any progress." I wanted to create lessons that would benefit everyone. How, I wondered, could I do this without singling out one person?

I decided to use writing activities—both fiction and creative non-fiction. Writing is a wonderful tool to share with learners. Yes, you say, this will help you on your GED/EDP but it can also be fun and rewarding! Writing is a way for learners to measure their own progress and still participate in group activities. Therefore, you are addressing individual learning styles, while giving learners the community they need for academic growth.

As a teacher you can assess learners' strengths and stress their learning ability and move forward (always forward) from there. The activities I used in my classroom were experiments. They involved memory games, use of imagination, physical movement and, eventually, writing. Often the activities began as group work and became more independent when people felt they were ready. Being different, I try to stress, is not a disabling thing. On the contrary, it means your perspective is different; the information you are trying to process is the same. Being able to progress in your own way despite what you are told you should be able to do is an enabling endeavor.

At the beginning of the project, there were two learners in particular I wanted to focus on enabling.

Working with Emily

The first, Emily, is in her late thirties, with three children, two in college, who are pushing her to, as she says, get on with her life. Her daughter is convinced Emily is dyslexic and wants her to see a psychiatrist, go into therapy, get tested for learning disabilities and, somehow, graduate from school.

For the first two weeks of the summer session, Emily was uncommunicative for the first time ever. She was also depressed to the point that she was crying in class. When we began our summer session with the educational history writing project (see Appendix) she refused to do it. She felt we had done something similar earlier in the year. She also said she could remember nothing of her schooling. Nothing! I was surprised to discover this but also realized my limitations as an educator. It was not my job to "help" her uncover her past. All Emily wanted from me were words, language, the reading and writing skills she had been trying to assimilate.

Since our program was in the middle of hiring a new counselor, I instead referred Emily to a local hospital for testing. I told her my role was to teach and that was all I could do. I stressed the fact that I am not trained to identify or correct something she feels may be a learning disability. I told her I supported her decision, but the class would continue along the path it was taking. She could participate at a capacity in which she felt comfortable. Since the process was so individualized, Emily would, hopefully, be able to identify which areas she felt she needed the most help in. I wanted to concentrate on what she thought were her strengths.

Emily accepted what I told her. I was pleased because I began to see a way in which I could strengthen myself as a teacher. I was beginning to learn to define

my role; as a new teacher this is something one must figure out for oneself.

So off we went into the writing curriculum. I wondered if everyone would be sick of having "another writing assignment" every other day or so. As it turned out, after the second week, people came to class knowing what it was they needed to work on. If someone, like Emily, was not interested in a particular project, there were others where she could add her creative touch. In addition to reading and writing activities, the non-verbal physical activities (that Emily seemed to excel in) seemed to balance the class. People felt strong in something, be it writing or talking or simply moving; this was my original intent.

I made it a point to listen to any passing remarks Emily made. I knew there had to be something I could do in this setting to help her progress. She mentioned that she was interested in "trying" the GED. (She had been, up to this point, in the External Diploma Program or EDP.) We discussed the idea and decided to switch her to my GED class. She thought she could not take the GED because it is a test and she never does well on tests, she said. I stressed that it was a gradual thing. You do not have to take the GED all at once, I told her, you can take it in steps. So we chose the Interpreting Literature and the Arts test for her to start on. I also switched her from my afternoon class to my evening class—new time, new people. My hope was that, by changing her classroom and showing her progress slowly (by improving test scores, working on specific sections of the test and learning how to take a test), her confidence would improve.

I believe we are on the right track to enabling Emily to pursue her goals of college and then child psychology or computer programming (she has yet to decide which).

Working with Craig

Craig has been in our GED Program for a little over a year. Although he excels in math, he has trouble with the other tests on the GED. Craig never reads or writes outside of the classroom. I wanted to encourage him in the area he felt strongest in—math—and try to strengthen his reading and writing skills.

Craig's attendance is usually pretty spotty, but I decided to create projects that he could work on at home, if he cared to do that. The writing curriculum started off with conversations and movement in our classes. The class members knew each other rather well, so people felt comfortable talking about their family histories and sharing creative writing with one another. We also tried various movement exercises. You can use exercises that require little or no movement (having people walk around the room with their eyes closed; asking the class to turn so no one can see anyone else and then asking them to remember details about what the other person is wearing). These exercises work as catalysts for creative writing; they can also add some energy to an evening class in the middle of summer.

Although everyone was a little apprehensive at first, people started to come to class on time or earlier. I would also give Craig extra writing assignments—he tended to give up on one if he could not think of anything to write immediately.

By the end of the summer term, Craig had sought out a writing tutor on his own time (our tutoring times were not compatible with his schedule). His writing went from one paragraph in one hour to a page or two. Although we still have work to do on basic grammar and essay construction, I prefer the approach to be creative and non-threatening. Craig's progress is steady and exciting. He writes essays at home on the weekends and is much less hesitant to read in class. Instead of being ready to drop out of the program, he is beginning to see that his progress will only grow if we keep working at his own specific talent for putting words together.

The Teacher's Role

Too often in adult education the emphasis is on "fixing" a learner's life. It is not always a conscious decision of educators, administrators, or volunteers, but it occurs. We have a great task before us with every adult learner we meet. They bring their frustrations, fears and histories with them, to every class, as does anyone in an educational setting (teachers included).

Very often we educators think if we can alleviate fears and curb frustrations, learning will take place. Frequently, we find ourselves trying to be everything to everyone when in fact we are only individuals, teachers. Through all the adjustments and modifications that occur when we try to fix things, we may notice there are still blocks—new frustrations, new fears. Again, we try to attack these stumbling blocks.

What we seem to ignore is the idea that fear and frustrations are simply the messier parts of life—everyone has them. In the classroom they tend to surface because what frustrates or intimidates the learner is obvious or visible or, at least, noticeable.

How often do we zero in on learners who are relatively content? How many times have we dug deep to find out why someone comes to class everyday or enjoys being challenged? Not often enough. There must be some way to incorporate educational plans of learners who have significantly less noticeable fears and frustrations with others who turn off at some point in a lesson or, simply, never follow.

At the beginning of this project, I hoped to create lessons that could be used at any level. I wanted to

address the possible range of people in adult education classrooms as well as their various learning styles.

It is important to personalize a learner's educational plan, but it should be based on the learner's needs as they are expressed by them personally or within their work. We cannot be everything. We can only teach and attempt to give people tools for their own and their educational survival.

My job as a teacher is to give people tools to get through the messy parts of learning (reading, writing and math) as they see them and eventually to reach their life goals. I am in the classroom to enable learners. I see no benefit in assessing an adult learner as having a learning disability. The act of reaching adulthood is a miraculous thing; let us move from that point forward. I do not believe the information (i.e. telling someone they have a disability) is necessarily beneficial to them or to your classroom. If someone is putting out the effort and still not succeeding, I first investigate my teaching style and make sure it is addressing the learner's basic needs. It is a question of learning style or differences. I am not, nor are many (most) of my colleagues, trained to identify and remedy a disability. If learners decide they want to be tested, fine, it is up to them. Still, the classroom is a place for enabling. If students learn they have a certain type of disability, they need to investigate ways to address it. My role is to help by creating lessons and homework that includes them and identifies their differences without excluding them, "dis-abling" them.

I found the writing curriculum built, over the summer, confidence in writing skills. Even people who were convinced they could not write, wrote. I stress the importance of participating and measuring your success against no one but yourself. Having a variety of exercises (begun as a group and then assigned as individual tasks) makes the classroom a flexible place where progress occurs in small, individual victories.

Emily continued to work with the class over the summer and continues to make progress that she can see, which is important. No matter what the tests say, if a learner sees no progress in what she is doing, it may be a long and frustrating journey. Emily has taken the Interpreting Literature and the Arts test (she did well enough to encourage her to keep trying and she is getting over her fear of tests). She is also getting outside help trying to find out the specifics of her learning style. This information may help with the GED since the test is adaptable in some ways for learners with a diagnosed learning disability.

I accept my limitations as a teacher but continue to build on my own strengths with this knowledge. I can only hope the learners in my classes realize they can do the same. Ω

Appendix: Writing Curriculum Ideas

Try to let ideas develop as the class progresses from one type of writing to another. I did a "survey" at the beginning of the summer and read poetry, drama, fiction, memoir, creative non-fiction, and anything else I thought might be interesting. I asked people what they enjoyed the most and developed writing assignments around those types of writing. The great thing about doing it this way is you have a text to refer to when people get stuck in their writing. Oh, and if they say they are stuck, tell them to keep writing. Either they will get unstuck or they will give you pages and pages of things that may not make sense—it does not matter. The important thing is to write. Teach people the magic in putting pen to paper.

The following are some writing projects/exercises that were successful:

Educational and Cultural History Projects

These projects lasted the entire summer session. I had people do at least two drafts of their papers, sometimes more. I found that revision is a skill that should be taught from the beginning.

Initially, as a class we defined history. I accepted any definition because I found them all to have some truth. I let people know that I am not looking for one right answer; I want to be exposed to as many different viewpoints as possible. How else would I learn?

After we had a definition, we made a timeline (on the board) from the time we were born until the present. We only put on the things we could remember—from our childhoods or, even, adulthood. Everyone started off by saying they knew nothing about history but when I would ask them what year their child was born, they would remember something that was going on in the newspaper around that time. We also put birthdays, anniversaries, and the years people dropped out of school, on the timeline.

From there, I assigned the project of writing the story of school. I wanted everyone to start with their first memory of school and just go from there. I stressed that if anyone got stuck to remember our timeline and how it does not have to be a straight line or even very accurate to anyone but ourselves. Having this information about a learner's education gave me an idea of the

last school experience people had before they came to the Adult Learning Program.

The cultural history assignment was born the same way except I wanted people to define culture and then write about their cultures, whatever they were. I asked that no one go to a library and get factual information about a culture because everything I wanted to know was right there in their heads.

Instead of a timeline, we began to discuss cultural histories by drawing family trees. People began to recognize history as something not necessarily in a book.

Dramatic Writing

We began by reading various parts from plays and discussed what made them interesting (or not so interesting). We then decided to write our own play —with each class member choosing and describing a character. As a group we decided on setting, time, and tension. We critiqued one another's work (everyone worked in pairs) and worked as a group to make the play cohesive.

The class also compared our writing with other "playwrights" (e.g., Lorraine Hansberry and William Shakespeare). We read plays and watched videos of dramatic productions.

Movement/Memory Exercises

I found these exercises helpful when people thought they couldn't remember anything else (for their educational and cultural history projects).

The first exercise had students get up from their chairs, look around the room, and then close their eyes. Eyes closed, everyone had to walk around the room twice and stay in order. I gave no other directions. Occasionally, I spoke to prevent people from physically running into one another and also to allow people to know where the edge of the room was by the sound of my voice. Eventually other people began to talk and everyone made it around twice, safely. After the exercise, I talked about using what you know to get around physically and when you write.

This was a good exercise for the entire class because it was an equalizer—no one was any better than anyone else and everyone empathized with one another.

In the second exercise students turned their chairs away from their desks and faced the wall in such a way that they could see no one. I usually start this at about the middle of a class, after we have been having a discussion. When I am sure no one can see anyone else, I start to call on people randomly and ask them what other people in class are wearing. You will be surprised (as will your class) at the amount of information people store away when they are not even trying. This exercise is a great way to reinforce the idea that everyone has something in their head, that everyone has something to say.

Observation Exercise

Have the class disperse and write for five minutes somewhere else in the school area. They have to write down everything they experience with their senses. If you say ten or twenty minutes, everyone's idea of time will be grossly different and you will have a class that meanders in over a twenty to thirty minute time span. So, five minutes is good.

When the class reconvenes, have students read what they wrote. Again, this is a great equalizer—everyone experiences something.

Now, have everyone change all of the nouns in their observation piece. Try to get them to pick things not associated with the particular noun they are replacing. (For example, with "He got gum on his shoe," "gum" becomes "fish" and "shoe" becomes "sun." "He got fish on his sun."). It will be an entertaining exercise but it will also show people how flexible language can be. It also teaches about grammar, indirectly. It is important to teach people to let go of the precious things and keep what really works.

In one class I had people rewrite their observations with the new nouns and make them make sense.

Think of other exercises, things you have always wanted to try. Think of something you are good at, an area where you have a particular strength, and show the learners in your classroom how to use a strength to their benefit. Have fun.

An Ideal Student's Lack of Progress, or Snowshoveling in Unfamiliar Territory

Martha Merson

He who will not understand your silence will probably not understand your words.
— Anon.

Challenging learning situations give adults the chance to shine. At our best, we remember and apply new information. We're talkative, relating our past experiences to the problem or question at hand. At times, however, we're overwhelmed. Self-doubt creeps in and we become silent, with the silence I associate with heavy snowfall. An internal monologue takes our attention. While racking our brains, we're also hearing internalized voices asserting that we won't get it, that everyone knows or will know how stupid we are. Are we accomplishing any thinking during those silences? Some days the material is right at our fingertips. High expectations from an instructor can prove exhilarating as we rise to meet them. Yet other days, working on something easy is all we can do. Why isn't our learning behavior more consistent?

I have said many times and written in many places that the adult literacy teacher, faced with a puzzling learner, should make every effort to engage the learner in speaking about his or her process. We have to ask. Only our learners and our own engagement with them in the throes of reading and writing can help answer our questions about their learning strategies. It was with this mindset that I went into a new tutoring situation, determined to enlist Sylvia's help in making her decisions and her internal monologue audible to us both.

Getting to Know Sylvia

Sylvia embodies many of the contradictions I have seen in myself and other learners. My role with her was not uncommon. I came in once a week for two hours as a writing tutor, to give her individualized attention during her 20 hour a week program. I talked with one of her previous teachers about her strengths, her work, and her plan to retake the GED test. One of the biggest challenges for a teacher who wants to use volunteers is how to transfer the accumulated knowledge she has about the student to the tutor. What we "know" is so subjective. We have a collection of memories, raw observations. We have interpretations based on observations that are subjective knowledge. We have expertise in teaching that we match to the profile of the learner we've created, with her input. All this would benefit me as a tutor. Yet it's impossible to fill someone new in completely. Even though I was very interested and had only one student's details to remember, I find that I retained only the highlights which follow.

• Sylvia seemed ideal for a study on lack of progress, because she has been at the ABCD Learning Center for five years. In spite of her outstanding attendance record, Sylvia's progress has been erratic. From week to week, Sylvia's recall fluctuates. She may deny any knowledge of something she has encountered frequently. In writing, Sylvia remembers not being able to write at all when she entered the program. Now she chooses to spend extra time on writing. She can write a paragraph fluently. Lately her GED teacher, Clare, has been giving her assignments from a pre-GED book that was easier. Sylvia seemed to make faster progress and grasp ideas for new learning and review more easily.

• Sylvia was born in the U.S. of Filipino ancestry and is middle-aged with her own close-knit family. According to Clare, she is reluctant to criticize. In this way, she is typical of adult learners who are so grateful for the opportunity to learn that they won't offer negative feedback about their teachers or school.

• Her memories of childhood are sketchy at best. Though many adult learners wish to write an autobiography, Clare thought I should know that this type of assignment would not evoke rich memories. I should probably avoid writing assignments that draw on those memories.

• Sylvia has taken the GED tests. Her scores total 172 when 225 is passing. Her lowest scores are in Math (23) and Writing (32); she wants to retake the Writing test first, although for many this is the hardest test.

Establishing Intentions

My dual task is to help Sylvia prepare for the GED Writing Skills test *and* to find out what it is that is holding her back. Sylvia and I did three main pieces of writing during the summer. In each one I encountered an unexpected difficulty that may be contributing to Sylvia's lack of progress: dedication to concrete details, inability to paraphrase or to put questions in her own words, and complacency with her reading process. I'm not going to be able to "fix" Sylvia. Aside from the fact that she's not broken, the best I'm going to be able to do in two hours a week is to call her attention to some patterns of thinking that she might want to change because they aren't productive or that she might want to adopt because they've worked for others. Any new patterns of thinking that she might want to adopt will be much easier for her to assimilate if I can suggest ways for her to integrate them. If I can spot something she does that is already like this new pattern or if I can show her how it builds on a strength, it will feel much more comfortable. What follows is a description of the work Sylvia and I did together, the sticking points as they surfaced, and some ideas of what to do about them. I've also included some insights about myself. For if we continue to assess our own strengths and strategies as teachers, we can pursue growth in those areas where it is needed.

In a tutoring situation, it's typical to introduce the tutor and student, to have them chat without a lot of instruction, and then to set a first meeting. From the initial introduction to Sylvia, I remember a button pinned to her shirt, pink print on a black background, from the Massachusetts Breast Cancer Coalition: "Close the Gate at One in Eight." While many learners contribute to charities and participate in the Boston Walk for Hunger, wearing an MBCC button is a rarity. Sylvia immediately recognized me from two years ago when I observed a class she attended. In some ways her memory is very good! Sylvia showed me her folder of current work. She had a packet of worksheets from a GED book on writing letters. In showing me different drafts, she noted that she usually writes letters that start with a greeting rather than a heading with the place and date. In second drafts she followed formal business letter writing format.

Sylvia Writes

The first time we met to do work, I asked Sylvia whether she would like to go over writing from her folder or begin with something new. She opted to start fresh. We did a writing assignment adapted from Perl and Wilson, *Thru Teacher's Eyes* (see Appendix). This guided writing has produced excellent pieces from students in the past, especially from those who know they have a lot to say, but who get stuck after a paragraph. (This particular adaptation can be found in *The Fabric of History*, a GED U.S. history curriculum by the Boston Social Studies Team.) As Sylvia wrote in answers to questions I posed, I noted that she often reread. This is a good sign for a writer.

Sylvia wrote about clothes she felt comfortable in as well as clothes that sent the message, "I am competent." Sylvia found the prompts that were designed to elicit metaphors and similes the most difficult. In the first one, Sylvia stayed close to home. "Finish the sentence: I feel like a _____ in these clothes." She said, "I feel like a wonderful woman in these clothes." The second such prompt reads, "Finish the sentence with the kind of animal you are most like: In these clothes I am a _____." I gave her an example: "In these clothes I feel like a cat." Sylvia chose to use it rather than to come up with her own.

After writing, sharing, and revising, we talked about a title. "What did we write about?" I prompted. "Shirts and slacks," she replied. Sylvia's answer sent up a red flag for me. Had Sylvia's mind reduced the personal piece about comfort, freedom, and image to mundane items of clothing? Was she answering with the least common denominator or did the writing start out as a mechanistic exercise and continue on that plane in her mind? Her answer reveals a lack of imagination. Laughter and ridicule can kill an imagination. Did that happen to Sylvia? Shirts and slacks are much more concrete than comfort and image. Perhaps Sylvia is very loyal to concrete details and not necessarily lacking in imagination.

At the end of our first session, I suggested that we read and write about breast cancer at our next meeting. I intentionally gave Sylvia veto power over everything that happened in our sessions. By telling her the plan or the possibilities in advance, we shaped our sessions together. She agreed and began telling me in detail about her experiences with health care and cancer. In the next session, we read a student-written photonovella about breast cancer prevention called *What a Friend Can Do for You.* Although Sylvia had obviously been willing to talk about her own life, I didn't want to take her self-revelation for granted or to come up with an assignment that depended completely on details of her personal health. I imagined that the writing would be most effective if Sylvia were willing to start with her own experience, yet I know how vulnerable personal writing can feel. I brought in the photonovella as another way to write about a subject obviously close to Sylvia's experience.

After giving her the option, Sylvia chose to read aloud. I remember being surprised that she didn't read more fluently. Whereas she had reread frequently in her writing process, she didn't pause to reread the story at all. She seemed content to go on after her first reading of the material. As this was close to one of our first meetings, I was still getting a feel for what Sylvia could do independently. I continued with the lesson, not wanting to express doubt or challenge her on this issue of reading. Because one of my goals is to get Sylvia to talk about what she is doing, I want to draw her out. I'm careful not to make her defensive about her reading. If I insist on anything, it will be about understanding and articulating her response to questions about process.

While our first writing assignment had been along the lines of free writing, this next piece I thought would be more public. I wanted Sylvia to write a letter to the authors of the photonovella. (In free writing, the point is to let the writing flow without attending to audience, editing, or spelling.) In this piece there would be an audience: the authors/characters pictured in the photonovella. I thought a letter with an authentic audience would be easier to write than an essay with no audience in particular. Sylvia did some of the writing on the computer. I took over the typing after a while. She dictated. I reminded her of experiences she had mentioned last time and we wove those in. After drafting, we reread what we had. The piece had paragraph breaks, but no real organization. To work on the organization, I cut up the paragraphs and we talked about what would make sense to include in the opening paragraph. Immediately we were at odds. Sylvia chose, "Mammograms are a good thing." Still working from the idea that we were writing a letter, I wanted to connect with the authors. I wanted to start with "I read your book *What a Friend Can Do For You.* Overall, I thought the book was about mammograms and self-examination." Yet, I didn't want to continue to tell Sylvia she was wrong. I altered the plan and said her choice would be perfect if she were doing a GED essay. Why not do both?

The obstacles emerging here included Sylvia's reading level. The GED level might denote a wide range of reading ability; however, the photonovella was written with low-level readers in mind. It wasn't just Sylvia's reading fluency that was getting in the way, it was her seeming complacency. She used one of her favorite coping skills: continuing until she can't get any farther before asking or turning back. Looking back now, I see she didn't grasp the task. She didn't apply what she had learned in the workbook pages about writing letters to this assignment.

The third writing assignment started out like a GED essay in that I wrote a question—admittedly a hard one—and asked her if she was interested in responding to it.

> History is all around us. It is the 1970's and 1980's we lived through. It's the way our neighborhood used to look before we lived there. It's the way our grandmothers did things. History is also the Bill of Rights and the setting for movies. Use some examples and explain why it is important to know about history.

As with the breast cancer topic, Sylvia related immediately. She saw in the question the notion of how neighborhoods change and she began to tell me about people in East Boston who were forced to sell their homes to make way for housing projects. Sylvia took the assignment with her and wrote about the Bill of Rights. "Without the Bill of Rights some people wouldn't know what to do, like voting. However, if the people didn't vote we wouldn't have a president to help us in some ways or have a government ruling the country." I read what she wrote and we reread the question. Again it triggered memories of how a neighborhood has changed. This time it was Charlestown. Her descriptions were rich in detail—an indicator of Sylvia's visual-spatial strengths. Sylvia's ability to connect with any question, to find an entry point, to recall examples from her own experience will enrich her writing. What held her back on this writing assignment?

I wanted Sylvia to frame her response by referring back to the real question. I directed her attention to the essay topic. "What is this question really asking you? What's the background or explanation and what's the real task?" I tried to explain again: "It's like a puzzle. Part of it is the frame and we need to put that in first. We can use your experiences as the inside pieces." I must have badgered her, asking her the same question in different ways, but I didn't want to give up until I was certain she understood the question, but didn't know how to answer it (as opposed to not being able to answer because she didn't understand the question). Finally I showed her the task "Explain why it is important to know history" as opposed to the background "History can be the Bill of Rights, the way our neighborhood has changed," etc. GED essay topics are typically generous with words. They explain their terms or give examples within the question that might help a test-taker get started.

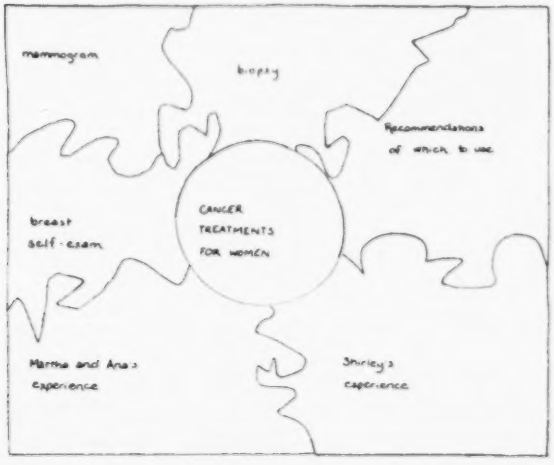
Then I wanted Sylvia to tell me the task in her own words. This also proved difficult for her. This is a skill I don't think I could live without. I constantly monitor my own written or oral answers to questions by comparing them to my interpretation of the question. Does Sylvia do this unconsciously and simply find it hard to

do intentionally and impossible to do orally? Sylvia's own response to all this pressure was to indicate that she knew what I was asking for, but couldn't think of the words. So here were two ways in which writing an essay would always be a struggle. First, Sylvia would have trouble making sure she was writing on what the test-makers thought was the topic because she couldn't separate the task from the clues. She might be on topic because she can take a hint, but she won't be able to frame her essay with wording that makes reference to the question. Second, she won't be able to check herself because she can't put the question into her own words and then ask herself whether her answer matches that question.

A Step Further

As I uncovered obstacles, I planned mini-lessons to give Sylvia practice. The letter/essay about breast cancer had really been an exercise in organization. The history essay had raised the need to paraphrase and to identify a task. The common thread here was abstract thinking. Sylvia needed to take a step back from the details, from the story, to create a frame, to create a logical sequence. She needed to make a distinction between the conversational context of a question and the actual question. Would it be possible to teach these abstract thinking skills in mini-lessons, I wondered.

I first wanted to reinforce the organization that we used for the breast cancer essay, so I made a self-correcting puzzle with the theme—breast cancer prevention—in the middle, and the sub-topics—mammograms, breast self-exams, biopsies—clustered around it.



Sylvia amazed me by putting the pieces together in no time flat. I am sure she paid no attention to the print. She didn't need to in order to fit the pieces together. This was my first tip-off to the strength of her visual-spatial skills. She told me that she likes to do puzzles at home. I talked to other teachers about how I could engage her visual-spatial skills in writing.

The day Sylvia had trouble picking out the question from the background, we had a break in the middle of our session. As soon as Sylvia left on break, I began to look for GED essay topics to practice sorting the question from the background. I made some up and asked her to sort the task from the background.

> • In the newspapers and on TV, one sees ads for Weight Watchers groups, fitness clubs, and low-fat foods. Many Americans want to be in better health. Explain some of the ways Americans have tried to get healthy.
> • Hobbies like stamp-collecting have been popular for years. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a hobby for free time?
> • Most hospital policy forbids animals. Should animals be allowed in hospitals to cheer up patients? Who will take care of the mess and what about germs? Write about what a sensible hospital policy should be.

Later we used some from GED books, like this one taken from *The New GED* (ed. Patricia Mulcrone, Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1987):

> Frustration and anger are emotions that all people feel at one time or another. However, some people are able to recognize and control their feelings, while others resort to unkind actions and vent violence when they are angry.
>
> Why are some people able to control themselves and their actions better than other people? Be specific with your ideas, and use good, clear examples to support them.

To capitalize on Sylvia's visual strengths, I put the essay questions on the computer and asked her to use the mouse to bold the part of the GED essay topic that is the explanation. She was to underline the part of the essay topic that is the question. This is difficult for Sylvia. She sees the key words, but I'm at a loss for the prompts that will help guide her through. I wonder if I told her to look for certain words—write, explain, describe—or to look at the second paragraph, if that would help. Sylvia probably needs visual cues, yet my own thinking is cued by internalized questions. I begin to see that when I share these questions with Sylvia, they just confuse her.

I began preparing synonym-matching exercises for her as well as some easier open-ended nouns or phrases for her to paraphrase. I figured that smaller units of language might be easier. Sylvia took the sheet

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and dutifully connected the lines between similar words. Although I'd tried to build in success by including the very examples we went over together, she took much longer than I thought she would. Then I was surprised by some of her pairings. Finding synonyms exercises one's ability to substitute one idea or concept for another. When at a loss, Sylvia makes associations. She matched "rule" with "important" and "policy" with "owner." I am still not entirely sure what Sylvia was thinking when she was silently puzzling over the words. Was she on the right track, asking herself pertinent questions, such as "Where have I heard this before? What do people usually mean when they say this?" Over time, Sylvia seemed to get much better at this. One day she asked me to spell the word "piece." She said, "piece as in part, not peace as in quiet."

We worked together on titling lists. This exercise forces the mind to identify the organizing principle. Sylvia did better on the lists that could be broadly grouped. The more specific, the harder it was. So, Sylvia may have a problem with some aspects of abstract thinking, but not all. She can generalize, picking the common thread and coming up with a title. She began to get better at substitution. Yet Sylvia continues to have trouble with the GED question exercise. This could be a matter of foregrounding and backgrounding or prioritizing information. Seeing the forest as a composite of the trees requires a particular kind of abstract thinking.

Explaining the Problem

It's tempting to explain causes. Yet the explanations we can offer seem one-dimensional, especially when there is so much to learn about an individual and her history. As I generate theories, I try to remain clear about their potential use and the dangers of potential misuse. The cultural explanation might be that Sylvia has tried to fit in. She went to Boston schools; something about her childhood was troubling. Many people cope by becoming ordinary, trying not to stand out. Perhaps using big words and showing an interest in language would have made her too noticeable. I remember a learner from Charlestown who tested low in vocabulary. Her low score was surprising given that she is a native speaker of English. I asked her if she liked words, liked using words that other people didn't recognize, she shook her head NO. Like Sylvia, simple words usually suffice. In some poor white communities, fancy words are a sign of uppityness. They make the speaker a suspect or, worse, an outsider and a target. Big words are better left unsaid. If this is true of Sylvia, then when we work on vocabulary and I encourage her to read more, I have to acknowledge that she is doing something subversive. Or I can tell her, "Just do this for a while, until you pass the GED." My intent will be for her to learn new words, but not to change so much that she won't fit in.

Much of the literature on adult learners attributes success and failure to low self-esteem. Perhaps low self-esteem contributes to Sylvia's difficulties. Her teacher Clare has speculated that Sylvia diminishes herself and gives too much value to authority. Her theory would explain why Sylvia has a hard time paraphrasing. The book or a teacher expresses an idea. It is perfectly well-stated. When asked to restate a question in her own words, Sylvia's internal voice says, How could I even come close to saying it that well? She becomes paralyzed. Sylvia, like many adult learners, is so grateful that she hasn't developed much of a critical view toward her own education. Someone with low self-esteem figures she deserves whatever she gets. The teacher and tutor know better, so who is she to ask for something different that might meet her needs better? This psychological explanation might appeal to me more if Sylvia hadn't told me about conversations she has with her kids about the merits of homework and review. She can defend the educational practices of her program. I have also heard Sylvia critique the care and advice and information she has received as a patient in the health care system. This takes a certain amount of reflection and critical awareness.

The ability to articulate the reading, writing or thinking process could be determined by a yet-to-be-discovered aspect of the language center. Perhaps this aspect of language resembles language acquisition in that it is time sensitive. If developed early, it functions. If it isn't stimulated it therefore can't develop later. Some artists, musicians, and athletes can talk about their creative process in interesting ways, giving us insight into inspiration and execution. Others, when they are interviewed by the same talented interviewers, are uncomfortable or can offer only the most superficial descriptions. Maybe everyone can't or won't be able to speak about their reading and writing process. In any case, Sylvia doesn't seem to probe her own mind. She doesn't ask herself questions about her own process or mine like: "How do you do a problem like that? Why doesn't it work to . . .?" I never felt as if Sylvia could give me much help as I sought to make her process more visible to us both. Digging around with her in her own process was like shoveling snow in someone else's yard. Neither of us knows where the wall starts and the steps end; the contours are not familiar at all.

Conclusion

Identifying causes is important to do because they might influence how I teach something, the spin I put on it or the intention I have when I present it. Most of

us try to make our instruction culturally relevant. We try to build in success to raise low self-esteem, and we consciously include our learners in self-assessment. Attending to cause does reinforce what we should be doing in any case. Not knowing the cause or causes, however, does not prevent us from knowing the student, from noticing strengths and tailoring instruction.

Sylvia is the ideal learner in terms of her ability to remember visual details, to connect personal experiences to a topic. Yet, without a sense of organization, Sylvia can't turn her talents into a 200-word GED essay. To work on this, and the related abstract thinking skills, Sylvia and I titled lists, we did the puzzle, we cut and pasted, we separated task from background in GED essay topics, and we did paraphrasing exercises. We've written essays on processes like doing the laundry and getting from East Boston to ABCD.

Sylvia's struggle to pass the GED writing test shows to what extent the writing test is as much a test of abstract thinking and organization as it is of writing fluency. A teacher or tutor can address those thinking skills in many ways. It may be helpful to use the GED books' chapters on main ideas, on beginning from one's own writing in creating a hierarchy of ideas, or on using visual strategies that become a part of the learner's own repertoire in monitoring her ability to stay on task. These questions and their answers are important to adult education teachers whose learners' minds may be organized associatively or by concrete details.

The question that will frame my ongoing work with Sylvia is: What happens when I teach abstract thinking skills in mini-lessons? A sub-question, one that I try to answer affirmatively and for good, keeps arising: Is abstract thinking important to teach? And then, can one teach just a little? How much is enough if it seems to go against someone's habitual thinking patterns? Ω

Appendix: A Guided Writing Assignment

Note for Teachers: If you choose to do this as a class activity, students will need to have paper and pen or pencil handy; however, at first, they can just close their eyes and listen. The following are prompts for you to read aloud. This is not meant to be a script, though it can be effective read as is. Read slowly. Pose a question and allow time for students to visualize or begin making notes. Then go on. Make sure that students know they can respond to all the questions or that they can stick with answering the questions at length that appeal to them. Begin here:

This is free writing. The form (paragraphs and punctuation) is not as important as the description. You can edit later.

Imagine yourself on a Saturday. You are very comfortable. Anyone who visited you at your house or who saw you on the street would know you were perfectly comfortable. You are completely at home with yourself. The weather is the perfect temperature for you—not too hot, not too cold. Take a closer look at yourself. What are you wearing?

Start to write down a description of the clothing. If you are wearing a favorite t-shirt or sweater, what color is it? How does the fabric feel? How does it fit on you? Is it old or new? Did you buy it for yourself or did someone give it to you? What does it say about you? If you are wearing shorts or pants, a nightgown or sweats, describe those. Do you feel calm in this outfit or lively? Write a sentence about where you are as you describe yourself. Finish the sentence, I feel like a _____ in these clothes.

Now you are going to change your clothes. Instead of looking comfortable, you want to look competent. The message to the world is, "I am totally in control. I have my act together." Describe what you are wearing. Did you have to change shoes? How do these clothes fit? How do they feel against you? Do you know what the fabric is? What colors are they? Finish the sentence with the kind of animal you are most like: In these clothes I am a _____. Describe where you would fit in if you were dressed in this way.

Finding the Key: The Educational Autobiography & Theory of Multiple Intelligences

Cara Streck

We have made a space to house our spirit, to give form to our dreams.
— Judy Chicago

The question is: What will my student and I discover if we look in her autobiography for evidence of the causes of a failure to learn, and how can I use the theory of multiple intelligences to make this process of uncovering a positive one?

Genesis of the Question

Hidden in their history, is, I believe, the key to understanding what makes it difficult for many of the women with whom I work to learn certain things in the present. I want to help those women uncover that key and explore with them how we can together use it to unlock the door that blocks them from learning what they so want to learn.

In some cases, I surmise, the key is low self-esteem engendered by family, teachers or other role models. In others, neurological damage may exist as a result of addictive behaviors. Still others may be trapped within emotional trauma, while yet another person may be experiencing the effects of environmental pollutants or suffering as a result of head injury.

Not all the problems unearthed through a study of women's educational autobiographies will be "fixable." I hope, however, that the process of naming and understanding why they have difficulty learning was an empowering one for the women involved in my study and will be for those in the future with whom I will use this technique.

I come to this study with the assumption that past experiences continue to affect us in the present and often shape how we perceive the future. This belief was forged in my own experience of having repressed conscious memories of severe emotional and physical abuse during the first seventeen years of my life. How I learned, what I chose to study, how I measured success, and the pleasure or lack of it I found in education were impacted by these memories. Liberation is coming from recovering the memories and integrating them into my understanding of who I am.

All of the women with whom I work have been traumatized severely at one or more periods in their lives, most while they were in the process of receiving a formal education. I believe that the trauma itself coupled with the ways women were treated by teachers and/or the school system while they were undergoing or trying to cope with its effects has a lasting impact on how they learn. If they were naturally linguistically or logically smart, they probably were able to succeed in school. If, however, they were musically, or kinesthetically, or interpersonally smart—smarts that have not always been highly valued in many classrooms— they probably got lost and became convinced they were stupid, had no smarts at all. I passionately want to help these women regain an appreciation of their innate smarts so that they can utilize them to reach their goal and get their GED's.

In the research documented here, I looked at ways that a student's educational autobiography could be used in conjunction with the theory of multiple intelligences to assist that student to move past her failure to learn.

Context

I work with students in the Adult Learning Program at Project Hope, a shelter for homeless women and their children in the Upham's Corner section of Dorchester. The education program was started four years ago at the urging of some former residents of the shelter who, when asked what would help them to attain the goals they had for themselves and their children once they had housing, said they needed and wanted to get their GED's.

We have between ten and twenty women in the program at any one time. Some are shelter residents who may leave the program when they get permanent housing. Others are former residents who choose to continue their association with Project Hope. Still others are women from the neighborhood or friends of women already in the program. Some have attended high school in the United States. A majority are immigrants, primarily from Haiti or Honduras, for whom English is not their first language. In this latter group are found women with differing proficiencies in English and differences in the amount and quality of the formal education received in their native land. All the women, however, have shown tremendous initiative, creativity and courage in raising their children and making a life for themselves in Boston, despite their poverty.

Because we have people at ABE as well as GED levels, each woman's program is tailored specifically to her needs and goals. We have a mix of small and large group instruction, along with one-to-one tutoring. The day runs from 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM, Monday through Friday, in a large room with six round tables at Project Hope. Most of the women have to rely on MBTA buses for transportation. Some make arrangements to have children cared for during class time in the child care center on the premises. All are affected by the schedule of the Boston Public Schools. All of these factors, as well as those logistical problems experienced by every parent, affect attendance.

I would also like to point out that I realize that some teachers may not feel comfortable or qualified to talk with students at the personal level that may result from using the techniques I discuss within this paper. I feel it is important that we respect our own limits as well as those of our students. The program within which I work provides a very safe space for women, often over a long period of time. I have had training in psychology and counseling and feel very clear about the reasons I, as a teacher, am eliciting and using this information as opposed to what they might be in a counseling setting.

Method

I chose to answer my question in two stages. First, I reviewed the educational autobiographies of two students in the Adult Learning Program. These had been collected at the time these students entered the program. I chose the two students, Shar Shar and Mim, because they had enrolled two years apart, had different cultural backgrounds, and had experience in very different educational systems.

Shar Shar is African-American, born and educated through tenth grade in Boston. She was a shelter guest of Project Hope four years ago and she has been sober and off drugs for the past three years. Shar Shar has two daughters, one in high school and one a preschooler, and is very motivated to give them a different example from the one she was given. She has been in the Adult Learning Program for three years and I have worked with her over the past two. Given her good attendance, her class participation, and her strong desire to learn, her failure to learn has puzzled and concerned me.

Mim is Haitian and graduated from high school in Haiti. Her first language is Creole. She came to Project Hope one year ago on the recommendation of another Haitian student. Mim has a two year old daughter who is thriving in the child care center at Project Hope. When I first met Mim a year ago she seemed quiet and withdrawn, self-conscious about her ability to speak English. By the end of the year, she was participating in discussions and enjoying writing. Math, however, seemed to be her nemesis and she seemed unable to progress at a rate commensurate with the effort she put into it.

After reviewing the intake information on these students and reflecting on my own experience of each, I arranged to meet with them together, for two hours, one day a week during the month of July, 1994. As it worked out, because of various crises in each of their lives, I met with Shar Shar once and Mim twice. Together we reconstructed their educational autobiographies and used the "Multiple Intelligences Checklist" from Thomas Armstrong's *7 Kinds of Smart* (Plume: New York, 1993, pp. 18-23; see pages 21-22 of this volume) to help identify where their strengths lay. In the second session, I worked with Mim to try and find ways to use her area of strength to help her develop linguistic and logical smarts.

I kept a teaching journal and analyzed that to help me discern patterns and categorize the students' responses. I also kept copies of the artwork done by Mim in session two and the ways we charted information during that session. I used this data along with my reflections on what I had observed in past classroom encounters to draw conclusions and to make recommendations.

I found that, indeed, the educational biographies of both Shar Shar and Mim did contain clues to their present learning difficulties. I also realized that there were both quantitative and qualitative differences between the material elicited in their intake autobiographies and the material discussed in our sessions together. One explanation for these differences could be that, because each of these women had worked with me for at least a year, she felt more comfortable sharing intimate details of her life now than she had when she was first interviewed as a condition of her being granted entry into the program. I also feel that listening to one another may have spurred each woman to look more deeply at her own history.

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Shar Shar's Story and Its Implications

Shar Shar's mother had deserted her husband and children when Shar was nine years old. At that point, she took over as mother to her four younger sisters and brothers. The year before her mother left she remembers being aware of the escalating tensions between her mother and father. It was in that year, when she was in fourth grade, that she was labeled as having "special needs" while none had been noticed the three years before. After her mother abandoned the family, Shar Shar learned how to cook and how to clean. She learned to sew and to bathe and protect her younger siblings.

I hypothesize that she was so overwhelmed by her own need for a mother as well as by her new responsibilities that she had no resources left to invest in school. She left her formal education behind in tenth grade with little or no regret. Having never caught up with the years she missed even while attending school on a fairly regular basis, she was never again able to live up to her earlier promise.

Shar Shar missed our last two scheduled sessions together in July because she had responded to a plea for help from a male neighbor who needed someone to care for his two young children while he went to work. The mother was no longer in the picture. Shar Shar, without stopping to consider that acquiescence would put a stop to her being able to learn more about her own learning styles, agreed. She also was seriously considering dropping out of the program in the fall in order to care for these children. To my mind that would have been a stark repetition of choices forced on her early in life. With help, she came to see the pattern and told the man he would have to make other arrangements for his children. She also, during the research period, chose to have an abortion because she did not see herself as being able to provide for another child unless and until she got more of an education for herself.

It seemed clear to me that while Shar Shar had stopped learning in school she had learned a lot in other ways. Using the "Multiple Intelligences Checklist," we confirmed what I had already observed, that she had highly developed musical intelligence. She also ranked high in kinesthetic smarts. Shar Shar, when asked about learning to print and write, talked of how she had really enjoyed forming the letters. At the time the fun of making them far outweighed any sense of the meaning they communicated.

Because she only met with me once in July, we were not able to pursue ways to help her use her smarts to learn material she has to master in order to get her GED. I hope to pursue this with her in the fall.

Mim's Story and Its Implications

Mim emigrated from Haiti about four years ago. She wants to get her GED and study to become a licensed cosmetologist. Her original educational autobiography was very sketchy, consisting primarily of a few grades and dates. All her previous education, except for an ESL class in New York, had taken place in Haiti before she entered the Adult Learning Program last year.

As we talked about what school had been like for her, she told me of being beaten by the teacher often for talking and for not sitting still. This occurred until she learned to be good in about the third grade. The checklist we used revealed that she was very high in interpersonal smarts. This confirmed my observations during the past year that she learned better through discussions with a tutor or the group than she did by reading or by just listening. I suspect that the methodology used in her early schooling—listen passively, then memorize and give back—had not met her needs at all.

Mim had been having a lot of trouble with math and her tutor had expressed real concern about whether she could be doing more to help her learn. Using the checklist, we discovered that she was lowest in logical-mathematical smarts. Some of this may be innate, but again a part of her personal history illuminates why math is such a problem for her.

In Haiti, the schools had a tuition fee. If this was not paid the child did not attend school for that semester. Mim's family relied on her older brother who was in the United States to send money back to them for the tuition fees of the younger children. Sometimes this money arrived late so Mim was kept out of school for months at a time until a new semester began. It seems to me that she must have missed large chunks of instruction, something that would be especially damaging in a sequential subject such as mathematics.

The other clue unearthed was that the methodology used in the classrooms relied heavily on memorization. Mim says she got very frightened when called upon to recite and forgot often. Then she would be punished. Mim's kinesthetic intelligence is moderately high so I wondered what the results would have been if Mim had been allowed to use manipulatives to develop number concepts before being asked to memorize. I did not have the opportunity to test this hypothesis but intend in the fall to teach informal geometry, which relies heavily on hands-on activities. I expect this to be of help to both Shar Shar and Mim.

In the second of the two sessions I was able to have with Mim, I structured our activities to test whether using her musical, interpersonal and kinesthetic smarts could help her learn history. We listened twice to selections from a tape (Chris Valentine, *The Musical Sea of Tranquility*, Vol. 2, Special Music Co., Englewood Cliffs NJ, 1987) of short pieces of classical

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music, then drew and wrote about the images we had while it was playing. I provided paper and a lot of different colored crayons.

After listening twice to the selection "Für Elise," I suggested we share what we had drawn and written. She seemed shy so I showed her my drawing and she helped me decipher the words I had written. Then she shared hers. She had identified the instrument used on the tape as a guitar and had drawn guitar strings with some fluidity. She had used two colors. Her writing consisted of two sentences that described what she had heard. "this music sound like guita music. the guita is playing without any singer good music." This is a factual response. I commented how she had identified the instrument and, until she called my attention to it, I had not. We listened in two different ways, both of which were valuable; I learned from her way of listening.

During the playing of the second selection, a "Slavonic Dance," Mim seemed more at ease. She again drew a guitar using three colors. She wrote, "Soft quit wonderful ocean." She then drew an ocean using pink and yellow. During the third piece of music, "Lullaby," Mim seemed quite absorbed in her drawing and writing. She first wrote, "Romantic peace Relasang." Then she used four colors to draw trees and fruit. The fruit also looked like a womb to me.

We took a break. Then I asked her to look at her last drawing and to think about a tree she remembered. She started telling me about a garden she knew when she was growing up in Haiti. As she talked, I diagrammed what she was telling me by drawing a circle with the word "garden" in a smaller circle in the center. I kept track of the things she named by placing key words within the larger circle, moving out as her memories took her outside the garden. She moved from describing the garden, to what she did there with her sisters and brothers, to a discussion of a traumatic event when she was 14 years old and in Grade 5. Her sister died. This girl had been her father's favorite because she was such a hard worker. After that Mim had been afraid to go into the room in the house where they had laid out the body. She has no memories of going to school that year after her sister died but presumes she did. Makes me wonder if there was any help for a grieving traumatized girl. What effect did this have on her ability to learn?

I reflected with her on how one image that came while listening to music had led us to such important memories. I suggested that she might be able to use music or images to help her remember other things she needed to know. I then showed her a picture of Hitler and asked her if she knew who he was. I chose Hitler because he defined an era in history and because, given the popularity of the movie *Schindler's List*, I felt she might know about him already. She did not, even when given his name.

I gave her two pages from a junior high history text and we started to explore who Hitler was together. Again I diagrammed our conversation as we talked, modeling for her a technique I thought might help her more than outlining, since logical smarts was her weakest area. We read that, as head of the Nazi Party, he became leader of Germany in 1933. We looked up Germany on a globe to see where it was in relation to Haiti and Boston, then found it in the map of Europe in the text. I explained that Hitler and the Nazis hated everyone who did not measure up to their idea of what a German should look like and be. She immediately related Hitler to Papa Doc in Haiti. When she saw that Hitler had died in 1945, twelve years after he gained power, she said that she saw hope for Haiti. Hitler had not been allowed to continue killing people forever.

I asked Mim to read the rest of the page about Hitler at home and to make a drawing or compose a song to help her remember the main facts about him that she would share next week with Shar Shar and me. We were not able to do that because neither woman came the next week.

Conclusion

I feel that the educational autobiography can give us important information about why one of our students has learning difficulties. It is a tool that becomes more effective as the relationship between the student and the one eliciting her biography grows in trust. I would recommend using this tool six months to a year after the initial intake with students who exhibit a failure to learn and whose difficulties cannot be traced to dyslexia or some other neurologically-based disorder.

I would like to see more research done on what questions elicit the most helpful answers. It would seem that there are three types: First, what did you like and not like about school and why? Second, when did you first notice you were having trouble learning or keeping up with what your teacher expected and what else was happening in your life at the time? Third, what have you learned outside of school and how did you learn it? Are these the most helpful questions?

As a result of doing this study, I also intend to keep better notes in my teaching journal regarding the information about their histories that students share with me and/or with the group. I realized that I had learned a lot about both Shar Shar and Mim as I helped them write and edit articles about their lives for a book we published as a class project. A part of that process involved sharing stories with the whole group around the table. If we do that again, I will listen with the intention of picking up clues as to their learning smarts and difficulties.

I found Armstrong's book to be very provocative and helpful. It gave me a way of "proving" to each woman that she was smart in very specific ways. It was not her "fault" that she had not learned in school. The problem was that all teachers and school systems had not recognized her areas of giftedness and so had not helped her use them to learn. Using the educational autobiography supported the fact that things outside her control had adversely affected her ability to learn. The theory of multiple intelligences supported the fact that she did have real smarts, real strengths that we could build upon. This gave a very positive thrust to what could have been a very negative discussion.

I would like to see more research done on techniques to help students draw on areas of strength to learn the material needed to pass the GED. I intend to use more visual stimuli to promote memory retention and, as I noted above, to use more manipulatives in teaching math.

The nature of the tests tends to put a premium on discrete bits of knowledge. What I find most of my students lack is a context within which these discrete bits fit. At Project Hope we are firmly committed to trying to provide modules that focus on either science or social studies but also require the student to read, write and use math. Into this process I hope to introduce the concept of different kinds of intelligences and see if we can get students to begin to use their gifts to answer questions and help us solve problems. I would be very interested in hearing from others who have tried this approach. Ω

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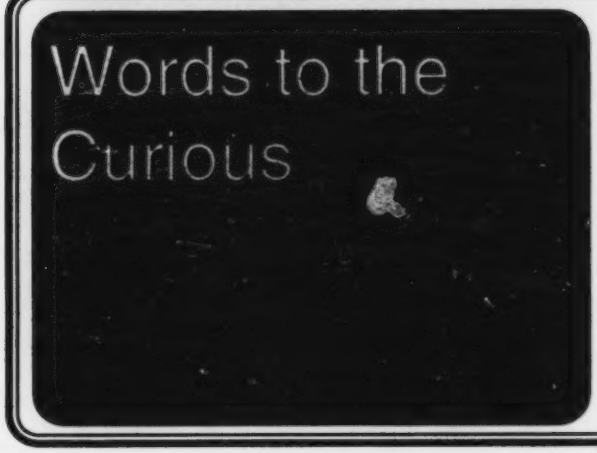

Lindy Whiton

...It's a lifetime in the planning...
—Judy Fjell

By way of concluding this issue of *Connections*, I would like to summarize what we learned, both from the process and the projects. In this article you will read my personal reflections on the history of the project, facilitating an inquiry group, the Boston Inquiry Collaborative, the impact this project had on individual practitioners, and its implications for the field of adult literacy.

The Rationale

For several years, adult education teachers in Massachusetts have asked for MORE on learning disabilities—more workshops, more readings, more referrals. At the A.L.R.I./SABES Boston Regional Support Center, the staff felt it was important to offer a forum that would give practitioners the chance to look in depth at learning disabilities and at what it is possible to do about them in the ABE classroom. Thus was born the Boston Inquiry Collaborative on Learning Disabilities and Lack of Progress. The reasons for the structure of a summer inquiry institute were twofold: one, that the field of learning disabilities has yet to offer a wide range of research findings specific to adults with learning disabilities, and two, that inquiry is a stance that practitioners can adopt to examine any number of issues in the classroom. In sponsoring an inquiry institute on learning disabilities, the participants would contribute to the literature on adults with learning differences *and* benefit from the teacher research skills they would develop in the course of the project.

The Structure

Letters of explanation and applications were sent to program coordinators in the Boston region. Meanwhile, Martha Merson and I planned four intensive sessions. We planned the first day and a half to accomplish: building a sense of community in the group, laying out our expectations for the completion of the institute, and generating the questions that haunt teachers about their students. We invited Marie Murphy, an expert on learning disabilities from Curry College, to attend our first meeting. Murphy addressed the questions the group generated and delivered a talk which told stories about her experiences with students in the Massachusetts prison system and with undergraduates at Curry College. She encouraged us in our efforts to chart new territory and made a lasting impression on the group by recommending *7 Kinds of Smart* by Thomas Armstrong. Participants left our first meetings with their research questions and a data collection plan in mind.

We came back together two more times. In July we came together for an evening. Martha had us find an item we were carrying with us that represented our projects to this point. It seemed as though people were having fun, and they had begun to think in more complex ways about the questions they had chosen. Some people had changed their questions entirely, knowing that their original ones were too large to answer in the few months they had available to them. Our primary objective for this evening was to begin using a data analysis process that has been developed by teachers at the Prospect School in Vermont. Lea Campolo let us use her Educational History Survey as something to examine. The outcome of that meeting was an increased understanding of how to look for patterns and implications in the data. Yet it was difficult for the group to take the time to just reflect without answering first. By the end of this session, it was clear that many of the questions had been clarified, but that the obstacles to looking at these questions were more apparent as well.

The last meeting was a whole day, designed to help everyone make the transition from thinking about data to writing about it. This was difficult for most. For some there was opportunity to get feedback on what they had written so far. Papers were due in a couple of weeks so we felt it was important to get started writing. Martha brought back the original lists of questions so that the group could discuss which had been answered, which were no longer important in our view, and which we hoped other teachers and researchers and teacher-researchers would answer.

What did the process tell us?

We learned from the teachers' questions. Of importance to staff developers and presenters was the fact that many of the questions did not refer directly to diagnosis. It seems that every presenter chooses to start with a definition and diagnosis. While some questions were related to diagnosis and definition, teachers' questions included: What types of activities are effective with a non-reading group in a short-term county jail setting? What will my student and I learn if we look for evidence of causes or failure to learn in the learner's autobiography? How do substance abuse and toxic waste affect my students' ability to learn?

While we were all motivated to answer every question after this exercise, we also found it reassuring to know that we could talk to each other in the course of the research and read each others' findings. The task of answering these intriguing questions became a group endeavor.

This group functioned without a working definition of learning disabilities. This decision may make some readers shudder; however, given our experience in Massachusetts, this seemed the path of least risk. The task of defining "learning disability" is incredibly difficult and consistently subjective. Some argue a definition which would include 75% of adult learners or more. Others want to be more specific and are therefore ultimately more selective. Rather than risk dividing the group over this issue, we chose to leave the definition open to interpretation. At the last meeting of the group, Martha opened the discussion. At this point, the teachers were more informed than in June so some were perhaps more convinced of their own perspective, but they were also invested in each other's perspectives and conclusions and reluctant to pass judgment that would exclude anyone's perspective. Meryl's conclusion suited many of us:

> When I finished my research, I felt much more confident about my original hypothesis, that the many intermeshing factors that influence the way a person learns and thinks cannot be separated. Even two people with similar influences will react to them differently.....Thus, rather than trying to categorize or label Lucie, I can concentrate on the next question, the subject of another paper: How can I reach into the complexity of the person that is Lucie and find the key to what will help her learn?

More important, however, is the notion that teachers don't necessarily need pat definitions. Perhaps still more noteworthy is that the pat definitions don't even help us get to the question, "What is the key that will help this student learn?"

Research is by nature a process that takes time. Like governmental task forces and medical research, teacher inquiry takes time. Inquiry projects need more than three months. Both Lea Campolo and Cara Streck acknowledge their work as unfinished. They needed more time with their students. Longer time periods for data collection would certainly have benefited all of the projects. Yet, the resources allotted were in no way wasted. Teachers are pragmatic and creative. This volume includes descriptions of interesting lessons, assessment tools, and helpful summaries of the literature. While developing ways to collect data, these teachers tried new lessons, prepared new materials and studied assessment practices. So, although three months is not enough time, it was still a very productive time.

Marie Murphy, our consultant on the content, had a strong impact on the direction that practitioners took in their inquiry. Although we had provided readings we thought the teachers would find helpful, on Murphy's recommendation, almost everyone bought and read *7 Kinds of Smart* by Thomas Armstrong. Many used the checklist and integrated the multiple intelligences idea in some way. Staff developers ought to be aware that a keynote speaker literally sets the tone for the entire group experience. Lea Campolo and others took the multiple intelligences theory to heart and wondered why the research had to be written rather than recorded or presented in other formats. In the future perhaps we can accommodate different learning styles by offering a video option for documentation.

What did we learn from the projects?

As a whole this collection reminds us that it is important and helpful for students and teachers to look at learning weaknesses in light of a learner's strengths. This approach gives teachers some indications on how to present information. For the learners themselves, instead of just being told that they might be dyslexic or ADD or any other diagnosis, the teacher reaffirms the students' strengths. It was also apparent that, when the teacher and students investigated strengths and weaknesses, they came up with a plan of action together. This gave the students some sense of control over their

learning, as exemplified in Katherine D. Hogan's, Ilda Montoya's, Martha Merson's, and Cara Streck's articles. In all of these articles a process of discovering strengths occurs and acts as a platform to jump off from for both teacher and student.

Teacher inquiry facilitates teachers' own processes of discovery. Lareese Hall notes, "I accept my limitations as a teacher, but continue to build on my own strengths with this knowledge. I can only hope the learners in my classes realize they can do the same." She and Cara both describe their personal philosophies of their roles as teachers and counselors. They both describe how they have come to terms with the tension between these two roles; it is a dilemma that all adult education practitioners have to resolve for themselves. Jessica Spohn reflected on her teaching: "I was an effective teacher before I began this investigation. This process has taught me a lot about how people learn. I think I will be a more effective teacher as I continue to incorporate the information the learning inventory provides me with."

Throughout the project, it was difficult for many members of the group to listen and reflect rather than answer or problem solve. For example, if someone wanted feedback on her research question, another teacher might have answered the question from her experience rather than responding by sharing excitement in that question or exploring what the question, framed in that way, might reveal or not reveal. In this field, we are always under the gun; therefore, we needed to adjust to the luxury of reflection time. We adjusted and had in-depth discussions of student retention and the conflicting and compatible goals of programs and learners. It was clear to me that teachers in adult eduation need more of this type of time.

We hope that the Boston Inquiry Collaborative's work will be the first of many such groups which will come together to share, argue, support, and increase the knowledge of practitioners in adult education. Lindy Whiton and Martha Merson are available to talk with teachers and staff developers interested in starting such a project in their areas. Ω

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Notes on Contributors

Meryl Robin Becker is a long-time teacher of ESL and ABE in the Boston area. She is the author of *Samantha: A Soap Opera and Vocabulary Book for Students of English as a Second Language*, which was published in 1993 by University of Michigan Press. In her free time, she enjoys playing the piano, Latin dance, and reading novels.

Lea Campolo is the education manager at Youthbuild Boston. She came to classroom teaching through her work teaching and educating on construction sites. She has worked in Roxbury and Dorchester for seven years and is on the verge of a multi-media breakthrough.

Janice Forcellese teaches and lives in Somerville. In 1994 she designed and presented an interactive satellite show geared for ESL students.

Lareese Hall is an ABE/GED teacher in Jamaica Plain. She is interested in developing new approaches for teaching adults to read. She is also learning to play the violin.

Katherine Dullea Hogan is a former medical secretary. Ten years ago she got involved in her niece's education and discovered her true vocation: teaching. For this, she would like to thank her niece. In addition to teaching, Hogan loves dancing, music, bulldogs, and visiting England. She is Mass. certified in moderate special needs.

Martha Merson works with adult education teachers and programs in the Greater Boston area. She enjoys mask-making and jewelry-making.

Ilda Montoya teaches at the Harriet Tubman House in Roxbury. She has worked on the English/Language Arts Curriculum Frameworks for the state of Massachusetts. In her free time she likes to write fiction and is currently working on her longest piece yet.

Jessica Spohn lives in Jamaica Plain. She has taught adult education for five years and is intensively interested in the learning process. She is currently struggling to be a good Chapter One instructor.

Cara Streck enjoys creating integrated curriculum which enables students to find connections among various fields of study. She lives and works in Dorchester as part of her commitment to the inner-city. Streck turns her talents to a variety of free-lance projects and derives her energy from light.

Betsey Webber is a long-time resident of the city of Boston. She brings her background in art to both literacy (0-3 ABE) and art classes at the Suffolk County Jail.

Lindy Whiton makes her home in western Massachusetts where she works with adult ed. teachers on issues such as participatory assessment and health while infusing a teacher research stance and fun into all her projects.

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